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Noel Coward's contribution to the comedy of manners.

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NOEL COWARD'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

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INTRODUCTION

An estimate of Noel Coward's contribution to the comedy of manners necessitates an understanding of: (1) the nature and the place of the comedy of manners in modern drama, (2) Noel Coward's background, and (3) an analysis of Noel Coward's formula for the comedy of manners.

We find in the material relating to modern drama little discussion of the comedy of manners. Occasionally plays may be mentioned as comedies of manners, but there is no discussion as to the specific nature of the comedy of manners in modern drama. The only book that discusses fully the comedy of manners in modern drama is Mr. Newell B. Sawyer's, The Comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Maugham. Mr. Sawyer reviews the sporadic endeavors of playwrights in the direction of the comedy of manners since Sheridan and points out the significant social factors which explain its dearth in the various periods of the past. But Mr. Sawyer also does not give us any insight to the nature of the comedy of manners in modern drama. He says, rather, that it does not exist in England to-day.

But Mr. Sawyer's definition of the comedy of manners is rigid, inflexible and patterned after the mold of the Restoration dramatists. If, however, the comedy of manners

is interpreted in terms of the life and concepts of the age that it presents, then it will be found in some of the works of Wilde, of Pinero and Jones, of Shaw, of Maugham and of Coward..The writers of the comedy of manners in modern drama have simplified the traditional form established in the last decades of the Seventeenth Century, and have suited it to their own methods and to the needs of the modern stage and audience. They have thereby enriched the content of modern drama.

The chief and latest exponent of the comedy of manners in the Twentieth Century is Noel Coward. Thirteen of his plays show preoccupation with the comedy of manners; in them he accurately reflects the post-war aristocracy. An analysis of his formula for the comedy of manners will indicate not only his particular contribution to the comedy of manners, but also the general tendency of the comedy of manners in modern drama.

Although there is little material on the modern comedy of manners as such, there is an ample supply of historical and critical books on the comedy of manners in the past,[1] on the nature of modern drama and on the conditions of the modern theatre,[2] and also on English comedy and the Comic Spirit in

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1. See works by Archer, Cheney, Eaton, Legouis and Cazamian, Perry and Thorndike listed in the bibliography.
2. See works by Chandler, Clark, Cheney, Dickinson, Henderson and Lewisohn listed in the bibliography.

English drama.[1]

The specific materials pertinent to our investigation are: (1) representative comedies of manners of the past and present,[2] (2) Noel Coward's plays,[3] and (3) tentative data on his life in his autobiography[4] and an uncritical biography.[5] Our analysis of Mr. Coward's plays will be confined to the comedies of manners or to plays which contain elements of the comedy of manners in order to show his development as a writer of comedies of manners. The materials dealing with Mr. Coward's life, though not critical, furnish sufficient factual information to explain the influences of his life which bear upon his writing the comedy of manners.

In order to arrive at an estimate of Noel Coward's contribution to the comedy of manners, it is necessary to present his plays against a twofold background, that of the drama (Part I, Chapter I) and that of his life (Part I, Chapter II). The analysis and development of his formula for the comedy of manners falls into four chapters (Part II): (I) his characterization, (II) his formula for dialogue, (III) his structural pattern, and (IV) his thematic material.

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1. See works by Meredith, Moore, Sawyer, Smith and Thorndike listed in the bibliography.
2. These are discussed in Part I, Chapter I.
3. These are enumerated and discussed in Part II.
4. Present Indicative, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1937.
5. Braybrooke, Patrick, Amazing Mr. Noel Coward, London: Dennis Archer, 1933.

PART I CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS IN MODERN DRAMA

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THE NATURE OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS IN MODERN DRAMA

Mr. Newell B. Sawyer in his book, The Comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Maugham, states that the comedy of manners does not flourish in England today.[1] But Mr. Sawyer considers the comedy of manners as a "reflection of the life of a unified, homogeneous and imperious class, in which manners are crystallized by precedent and sanctified by custom."[2] He defines it in his opening chapter thus:

> The phrase "comedy of manners refers to a comedy form reflecting the life, thought, and manners of upper class society, faithful to its traditions and philosophy. It is intellectually and dispassionately conceived in the nature of a detached commentary, in which the only moral considerations are sincerity and fidelity to the facts of the society represented. The attitude of the playwright, is, at least theoretically, unpartisan, although it is difficult for a latent flavor of satire to be kept out entirely. Characters may emerge into complete individuality, but more often universal traits give way to those types into which the world of fashion inclines to reproduce itself. Dialogue is naturally of more than ordinary importance, for the leisure of this world promotes the cultivation of verbal smartness, and this smartness dialogue must display, even if at the expense of naturalness. And lastly one feels a certain idealization of the whole picture - a heightening of values, a seasoning of effects, an acceleration of tempo.[3]

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1. Sawyer, Newell B., The Comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Maugham, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1925, p. 239.
2. Ibid., p. 123.
3. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

For the modern comedy of manners, it seems that Mr. Sawyer's definition is too rigid and inflexible. He has patterned it after the mold of the Restoration dramatists. Since the modern aristocracy and the social background of modern life are not identical with that of the Restoration Period, it seems that the comedy of manners in modern drama cannot be identical with that of the Seventeenth Century.

If we define the comedy of manners, broadly, as a play which gives a reflection, conceived in the Comic Spirit, of the contemporary world of fashion, an exposé of that world's foibles and weaknesses, then the comedy of manners exists as surely today as it did in the Restoration Period. We find in both the Restoration and the Modern Periods, brilliant, satiric pictures of the upper class, fashionable world of contemporary society. The frivolous characters of the plays, which typify the society depicted, speak a fast, witty dialogue and are chiefly concerned about restricted problems of amorous intrigue.[1]

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1. Mr. Sawyer infers that the comedy of manners does not flourish today because of the fact that there are few writers and few plays of this form. Although the comedy of manners has only a small place among the techniques of modern drama, it has never at any time except during the Restoration had a very important representation. Between the time of Congreve and Sheridan there were no comedies of manners worth mentioning, and from the time of Wilde, there have been none worthy of note. This dearth may be explained in part by the social and political conditions of the times, but the fact that the comedy of manners is one of the most difficult forms to make vital and requires a dramatist peculiarly adapted and one gifted with consummate skill is also explanatory.

But we find in the modern comedy of manners characteristics which not only differentiate it from that of the Restoration Period, but which also indicate the contribution which the modern writers of the comedy of manners have made. A brief comparison of the modern comedy of manners with that of the Restoration when this form of drama was in its heydey will point up these characteristics. First we will compare the writers, the societies, and the audiences of the two periods; then we will compare the plays.

The writers of the Restoration comedy of manners, Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar, are famous chiefly for their several comedies of manners. Although Congreve attempted a tragedy and a novel, he is remembered only for his brilliant plays, and the other writers evidently were not interested in writing other forms of literature. These men, as members of an isolated social group, were interested solely in presenting a glittering portrayal of their own social set for the amusement of its members.

The leading writers of the comedy of manners in modern drama, Wilde, Pinero, Jones, Shaw, Maugham and Coward, are known also for other forms of literature or other forms of drama; in some cases they are more interested in other directions. Wilde, who is best remembered for his comedies of manners, is also known for his poetry and novels; Pinero,

Jones and Shaw are better known for their social dramas and comedies than for their comedies of manners; Maugham's reputation as a novelist is considerably greater than that as a dramatist, and Mr. Coward's musical revues are as well known as his plays. With the exception of Wilde, all of these writers are imbued with a spirit of social consciousness and use the comedy of manners as a means of disseminating their ideas. Shaw, for instance, used the comedy of manners as a means of getting his plays on the stage. His Pleasant Plays, written after his Unpleasant Plays, were the first to be produced. These modern writers, like those of the Restoration Period, belong to the society which they depict in their comedies of manners; but there are differences in the nature of the two societies which explain the fact that the modern dramatists have not devoted themselves entirely to the comedy of manners.

The society depicted by the Restoration writers of the comedy of manners was an isolated and distinguished group. It was made up of the landed nobility, the dissolute court of King Charles II. It was a selfish, debauched, leisurely society concerned chiefly about formality, manners and standards. Mr. Ashley Thorndike says that it was convinced that there was a genteel way of doing everything, entering a room or writing a prologue, managing a seduction or fighting a duel.

He says that the aspirations of men and women were for style and wit, not virtue and valour; the courtiers lay awake nights trying to form epigrams and repartee.[1]

The society which the modern dramatists depict in their comedies of manners is much less sharply defined than that of the Restoration. It is a blend of the patrician nobility with the plebeian aristocracy; it is a new society created by the Industrial Revolution. It is a materialistic society; it is not primarily concerned about customs and manners. It is a group which is not completely isolated from the problems of modern life, but rather feels the impact of the moral tendencies, the serious elements, the psychological probings and the critical, corrective attitudes. The society which Noel Coward depicts is the fashionable world of the post-war era. On the whole, this society is less serious and more sophisticated than that of the pre-war era; it is, on the other hand, much more serious and less sophisticated than that of the Restoration when wit and form were the high criteria of fashion.

The audience of the Restoration comedy of manners, was, like the society which it depicted, isolated and distinguished.

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1. Thorndike, Ashley, English Comedy, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929, p. 276.

2. Mr. M. E. Cunliffe says, "The place of the older landowners has been largely taken by the new rich, who adopt the amusements of their predecessors without assuming their duties, for which they substitute the excitements and the excesses of city life." Modern English Playwrights, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927, p. 230.

No drama ever responded more completely to its audience; it was devoted entirely to the sophisticated court of King Charles II. The audience of the modern drama, however, is less homogeneous; many of the people who see comedies of manners do not belong to the society which they see depicted, but they enjoy seeing portrayed a world of people different from their own.

The comedy of manners, however, at any time appeals to an intellectual audience; there is no appeal to the sentiment or the emotion. We find in the Restoration drama elements of coarseness and sensuality in keeping with the nature of the society. These elements, though present, in our modern drama are less obvious; but in our modern comedies of manners, we find elements of social consciousness. While the Restoration comedy of manners appeals to the intellect in spite of its sensuality, the modern comedy of manners appeals to the intellect in spite of its social criticism.

In view of these differences in the backgrounds of the two societies, it is natural that we shall expect differences in the character of the plays. We shall, therefore, compare briefly the characterization, the dialogue, the structure and the thematic content of the plays of the two periods.

The characters of the Restoration comedy of manners are much more clearly drawn and differentiated than are those

of the modern period. The modern dramatists, however, present excellent clear-cut group portraits of the society depicted. The dramatists of the Restoration direct their ridicule against those in the society, or those trying to get in; while the modern dramatists satirize the society itself. They are more interested in the psychology of the civilized world of fashion. In each case, we find that the characters are typical rather than individual; the Restoration characters often show the influence of the Jonsonian humours. We find generally such types in the Restoration comedy of manners as the beaux and belles, the fops and coquettes, the cuckolds, the roues, the wits and would-be wits, the country boobs and the witty servants. The beaux and belles of the Restoration correspond to our ladies and gentlemen of fashion who have little to amuse them besides the game of sex; but many of the Restoration beaux and belles are presented before marriage. The modern dramatist concerns himself often with amorous affairs and intrigue which occur after marriage. The divorcee is a prominent type in the modern comedy of manners, but was unknown to the Restoration world. The loose moral code of the Restoration society was accepted by the playwrights as a natural characteristic; but the modern dramatist questions its social justification. While cuckoldry was highly ridiculed on the Restoration stage, it is not so laughable in the modern picture. Our modern

dandies suggest the Restoration fops, our adulterers suggest the Restoration roués; but the wits and would-be wits are not highly represented in the modern play, and the country character type is not held up for ridicule. In the Restoration comedy of manners, the servants often spoke as wittily as their masters, but in the modern play the servants generally speak as servants might.

The dialogue of the Restoration plays, the medium of expression for the wit, seems to us today unnatural; but it was not unnatural to the beaux and belles of that day. It was the fashion of the day to speak wittily and to use epigrams. The dramatists, no doubt, were able to present more glittering epigrams and repartee than that usually found in the drawing room and were able to whet the intellectual appetite of their audience.

In our modern comedies of manners also, the dialogue is much smarter, more brilliant and more barbed than that which our modern aristocrats are accustomed to hearing in their drawing rooms; but it is, on the other hand, much more conversational than that of the Restoration comedy. In our modern world, wit is not considered a necessity in the fashionable society; also the use of epigram and repartee

are fast disappearing from our modern theatre.[1]

The quality of wit found among our leading dramatists such as Wilde, Shaw, Maugham and Coward is, on the whole, more amiable and jovial than that of the Restoration dramatists. It is genial and humane, though often brittle and scintillating; that of the Restoration dramatists was cold, steel-edged and sharp as well as brilliant and scintillating.

In our modern comedies of manners we are not impressed with the vulgarities and coarseness which sometimes jar upon us when we read the Restoration comedy of manners. We find, however, a tendency toward the risqué and an open freedom of discussion of sexual and marital problems. This tendency has increased since the war, but the attitude of the English audience today is not as unmoral as the court of Charles II.

The structure of the Restoration comedy of manners is involved and complex; the plots are highly complicated with three or four distinct intrigues. To us, they seem difficult to follow; but evidently the highly select Restoration audience liked them. The structural pattern which the modern writers

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1. Mr. George Jean Nathan says, "One wonders how much longer the epigrammatic form of expression will survive in the theatre. That the sounds of funeral bells are already in the air is unmistakable. However tasty an epigram may be in these days, it no longer gets the proper reaction from an audience...(they are) frankly bored by it, it has lost its theatrical availability. The vital element of surprise is no longer present. From long familiarity with the epigrammatic form, the audience knows, in a manner of speaking, just what to expect..." "The Theatre," American Mercury, Vol. 10, Feb., 1927, p. 245.

employ is much simpler. They do not look to the Restoration dramatists for their pattern. Many of them have looked to the French makers of the "well-made" play, Scribe and Sardou, for their structural plan; they resort to artificially manipulated situations and theatricalisms. Some of them, like Shaw and Barrie, show little or no influence of the "well-made" play.

The settings of our modern comedies of manners, like those of the Restoration, are generally elegant. They are often found in the drawing rooms and boudoirs of aristocratic society. Such settings naturally lend the proper and fitting background for sophisticated society. The settings of the Restoration Period are perhaps more elegant and more limited than those of the Modern Period.

Chiefly, the themes of the Restoration writers are concerned with exposing, yet condoning, the elaborate shams of life in the foppish set. In their use of satire, they had no other purpose than that of ridicule; it was bitter and personal in that it was directed against individuals rather than groups.

In the modern comedy of manners, the thematic content is much more purposeful and apparent; it is often flavored with a moralistic quality. The dramatists wish to portray more than the shams of life in the world of fashion. They

have realized the psychological truth that if they can present the foibles and weaknesses of their contemporary society in a pattern of fun and laughter, they have a better opportunity to drive home the moral or criticism they wish to present.

By the above comparison, we have seen that the comedy of manners in modern drama has assimilated elements in keeping with the nature of modern life. The dramatists have kept the Restoration comedy in the back of their minds; but they have made specific contributions which characterize the modern comedy of manners and give the form new life.

Since it is our primary purpose to estimate Noel Coward's contribution to the comedy of manners, let us now sketch the development of the comedy of manners in modern drama in terms of the contributions of the leading exponents.

Oscar Wilde, the father of the comedy of manners in modern drama, wrote plays in reaction to the Victorian moral consciousness of his day. Mr. Eaton says that in the 1890's with the return of a realistic spirit to literature and with a new impulse to render contemporary life truthfully, there was also a return to the comedy of manners written from a fresh angle.[1] Oscar Wilde set a high standard for his con-

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1. Eaton, Walter P., The Drama in English, New York, Chicago and Boston: Charles Scribner and Son, 1930, p. 251.

temporaries and followers with his knack for clever dialogue, epigrams and pungent wit. Although Wilde's plays represent himself more accurately than they do the era in which he wrote, they mark the birth of the modern comedy of manners. Mr. Sawyer says:

> With the comedies of Oscar Wilde, Lady Windemere's Fan (1892), A Woman of No Importance (1893) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), the English comedy of manners achieved the prestige of literary style for the first time since the School for Scandal...He must be forever credited with bestowing upon social comedy the rare gift of witty, graceful dialogue...He could give to the theatre a vivid picture of society's Upper Tenth because he himself was a part of it.[1]

The contribution which Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, who were writing about the same time as Wilde, have made to the comedy of manners is that of excellent craftmanship. Although they are better known for their social dramas, Jones' The Liars (1897) and Pinero's The Gay Lord Quex (1899) are delightful comedies of manners. Their plays flow smoothly and are technically of the Scribe and Sardou influence. Although their plays do not indicate the exquisite style of Wilde or the profound thoughtfulness of Shaw, they are noteworthy for the English interpretation of the "well-made" play during the last decade of the Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth. Although the popularity of the "well-made" play as

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1. Sawyer, Newell B., op. cit., pp. 154-155.

a dramatic form has long since decreased, in the hands of Pinero and Jones it reached a high degree of success. In fact, they seem to have used it to better advantage than the creators of it, for in their hands it finally went to seed.

George Bernard Shaw is most important in our discussion for his distinct contribution to the comedy of manners. He has, in the first place, made the form more flexible than it had ever been heretofore. He says that a play is anything which interests an audience for two hours and a half on the stage of the theatre. Unlike Jones and Pinero, he has paid little or no attention to the form of the "well-made" play; yet there are numerous surprises in his plot treatment that are suggestive of Scribe. In his comedy of manners, Arms and the Man (1894), which was his first play to be produced on the stage, he satirized war and romantic love. This was indeed an extention of the subject matter of the comedy of manners.

In the second place, Shaw was revolutionary in his use of the drama as a means of disseminating ideas; he attacks the conventional ideas of morality, manners and social institutions with keen intelligence and incisive wit. His chief purpose was to stimulate thinking. With Shaw, the comedy of manners takes on an element of social consciousness.

Since Shaw, the new writers of the comedy of manners are no longer content merely to present the social scene of contemporary aristocracy; many of them are imbued with the Shavian spirit of satire and wish to expose in a spirit of fun and keen wit the weaknesses and manners of society. Unlike Wilde, Shaw felt strongly that art does not exist merely for art's sake; to have merely amused his generation he would deplore. The devotion of literature to reform was Shaw's major purpose, and it has influenced the writers of the comedy of manners in modern drama.

James M. Barrie has further shown the possibilities of the comedy of manners in modern drama. In his play, The Admirable Crichton (1902), he holds up to ridicule the whole scale of British society. His use of fantasy is a new element which had not before been used in the comedy of manners; the play abounds with humour and at the same time a criticism of life which is subtle and penetrating.

The men whom we have just been considering, with the exception of Wilde who wrote only during the last decade of the Nineteenth Century, represent the early Twentieth as well as the latter part of the Nineteenth. There are some other names of less importance associated with the comedy of manners about this time and later such as Hankin, Sutro,

Davies, Milne, Lonsdale and Ervine.[1]

In the second and third decades of the Twentieth Century, the names of W. Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward are most closely linked with the comedy of manners. Mr. Maugham, in his comedies of manners, Our Betters (1917), The Circle (1921), The Constant Wife (1927) and The Bread-winner (1930), has recaptured the spirit that animated the Restoration theatre, and has accurately reflected the aristocracy of his day. Mr. Coward, in his comedies of manners, has also. They have both blended the elements of wit, style, satire and social consciousness in a pattern of laughter. Mr. Maugham, who preceded Mr. Coward, has from all appearances withdrawn from active participation in the art of playwrighting, leaving Mr. Coward the outstanding modern figure active in the field. Their plays show more similarities than do any of the other modern dramatists who have written comedies of manners. It is therefore impossible to say which of the two men is the greater playwright. Mr. Maugham's considerable reputation as a novelist certainly may lend some glamor to his reputation as a dramatist. Mr. Coward's

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1. Hankin, St. John, The Cassilis Engagement (1907)
Sutro, Alfred, The Walls of Jericho (1904)
Davies, Hubert Henry, The Mollusc (1907)
Milne, A. A., The Dover Road (1923)
Lonsdale, Frederick, The Last of Mrs. Cheyney (1925)
Ervine, St. John, The First Mrs. Fraser (1928)

knowledge of the theatre is broader and more intensive than that of Mr. Maugham's. Mr Maugham's dialogue is less colloquial than that of Mr. Coward's nor is it quite as sprightly and brisk. The movement of his plays is not quite as rapid as that of Mr. Coward's, nor is there as much use of theatricalism. Mr. Maugham has said of Mr. Coward, "Since there is no one now writing who has more obviously a gift for the theatre than Mr. Noel Coward, nor more influence with young writers, it is probably his inclination and practice that will be responsible for the manner in which plays will be written during the next twenty years.[1]

We have indicated the nature of the comedy of manners in modern drama by comparing it with that of the Restoration Period. We have observed that the modern society and audience are less homogeneous than those of the Restoration; we have noted the differences in the character of the plays which result from the differences in the social backgrounds. We have sketched briefly the development of the comedy of manners in modern drama in terms of the contributions of the major figures who have essayed this form to the time of Noel Coward.

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1. Quoted by Palder, Rose, in Satire in Congreve, Sheridan and Wilde, The Maine Bulletin, Vol. 11, August, 1937.

PART I CHAPTER II

NOEL COWARD
AND HIS DRAMATIC CAREER

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NOEL COWARD AND HIS DRAMATIC CAREER

Our purpose in sketching the life of Noel Coward is to show the influences which bear upon the development and form of his comedy of manners. These influences, though closely interwoven, are of a twofold nature: external and internal, that is social and psychological. Such aspects of his life as the influence of his parents, his education, his social background and the effect of the war upon him are external; however his personal reaction to these are internal for they depend upon the inner nature of the man, the sort of individual he is. A brief outline of his career with emphasis upon the influences which bear upon his dramatic creations will show how the pattern of his life fits into his interest in the comedy of manners.

Noel Coward has given in his autobiography, Present Indicative, a presentation of the major facts of his life. While he makes a very great effort to be accurate and true in his reflections, it is only natural that he tells us only that which he sees fit to tell. Too, it is never possible for the autobiographer, try as he may, to see himself as others see him. We regret, therefore, that our information regarding Mr. Coward's life and influences must be gleaned chiefly from his autobiography. There are no

biographies of him thus far except Mr. Patrick Braybrooke's The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward, which contains only sketchy and meagre information about Mr. Coward's life; Mr. Braybrooke's emphasis is upon his admiration of Mr. Coward as a dramatist. We feel, however, that the information which Mr. Coward gives, coupled with a consideration of the impression which he has made upon his critics and the public mind (as will be reflected in citations to follow), and an analysis of his development as a dramatist, are sufficient for our purpose.

We shall discuss his parentage and early childhood, his education, his theatrical career, the phases of his development as a dramatist, his social background and its effect upon his plays, the effect of the war upon him and his career as a dramatist, his personality, the impression he has made in the public eye, the influence of his friends, associates and other playwrights, and the reflection of his travels in his plays.

Noel Coward was born December 16, 1899, at Teddington, England, a suburb of London.[1] His family were of middle class society.[2] They were poor; his father, Arthur Coward, received

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1. Coward, Noel, Present Indicative, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1937, p. 5.

2. Ibid., p. 4. He says also, "My mother came from what is known as "good family" which means that she had been brought up in the tradition of being a gentlewoman."

such small remuneration for his occupation of travelling for a piano firm that his mother found it necessary to take in boarders.[1] His parents were musical; they began and culminated their courtship at church choir practice; at times they appeared together in amateur theatricals.[2] His mother, Violet Veitch (prior to her marriage),[3] was a major influence in his life and in his theatrical career. She loved the theatre and helped in every possible way to foster and encourage his professional career. She took him to the theatre on his fifth birthday, and from that time on until his professional career placed him there, she treated him to attendance upon a play each year on his birthday. They would go to London in the morning and wait in the "pit queue."[4] Once at Christmas time, she presented him with a toy theatre which contained scenery sets. He immediately set about obtaining additional sets.[5]

Some stories which he tells of his behavior in his early childhood reflect not only this early familiarity with the theatre, but also his innate sense of the theatrical and his precocious nature. He tells of the time, at the age of eight, he forced some neighbor little girls to act out a tragedy he had written, and when one of them forgot her lines and

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1. Ibid., p. 9. Mr. Coward says a brother, Eric, was born in 1905, making the family four in all. (p. 6)
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 8.
5. Ibid., p. 8.

sniggered, he hit her across the head with a spade.[1] He describes a spell of hysteria while visiting an aunt; he became obsessed of the idea that his mother, though in excellent health at the time, was dying. He visualized the arrival of the fatal telegram, the journey home via train and the mournful meeting upon arrival, the house enshrouded in funeral gloom, and the vision of his mother in her coffin.[2] He states that long before he was twelve years old he travelled in and about London with ease, using busses, trams and trains. During these travels he enjoyed having conversation with strangers. He would allow his imagination to run riot, tell tales of horror about his brutal father and the squalor of his tenement room in which were housed his family including large numbers of undernourished and diseased brothers and sisters.[3] He relates further that one time he bought some red crepe hair so that he might parade in public with a long red beard,[4] and another time he stole a necklace from a friend of his mother in order that he might sell it to purchase a much coveted book.[5]

Noel Coward's education was received chiefly from the

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1. Ibid., p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. Ibid., p. 23.
5. Ibid., p. 11.

theatre, and from his own diligent studies in private. He was sent for a time to private school at Croydon,[1] but he was not a very satisfactory pupil; he hated school; it was too far removed from his special talents and interests. As his theatrical career from a professional standpoint began at the age of eleven and occupied most of his time and all of his devotion, his attendance meanwhile at school as an institution was very spasmodic; but he read avidly literature far ahead of his years, and with an acute precocity developed rapidly and gained knowledge at a feverish pace.

As his theatrical development and experiences are of such magnitude, we shall mention very briefly only the trend of his theatrical career. His musical talents were the first to become evident. At the age of six, he made his first appearance at a concert, singing and accompanying himself at the piano.[2] He loved dancing school, where he was sent at an early age.[3] From time to time he won prizes in singing and dancing competitions. At the age of eleven, he entered the professional theatre.[4] From this time on to the present, he has been actively engaged in the theatre. During his

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1. Braybrooke, Patrick, The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward, London: Dennis Archer, 1933, p. 12.
2. Present Indicative, p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. Ibid., pp. 20-22.

boyhood his capacity was that of performer and trouper, either acting, dancing or singing; naturally his dramatic parts grew in size and importance along with his abilities. This active participation in the theatre taught him the theatre from many angles, and was the best possible preparation for his subsequent career as a dramatist. At the age of nineteen he had written four plays,[1] and at the age of twenty-one he had written another which was his first play to be produced.[2] In this he played one of the major roles. In 1923 he took part in and helped with the book of a revue, London Calling;[3] it was at this time that he received his first insight into the making of a revue. From the age of twenty-one to the present time, he has either composed or published in all twenty-one full length plays or musicales (revue, operetta and spectacle) and a collection of nine one-act plays.[4] Of this number all have been produced except two of the serious plays.[5] He has not only written the plays and acted in them, but has often had a hand in the direction. He has not only written the books, lyrics and music for his dramatic musicales, but has also produced and directed them, and even at times has selected

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1. The Last Trick, The Rat Trap, Impossible Wife, Barriers Down.
2. I'll Leave It to You.
3. Present Indicative, pp. 167-171.
4. See the bibliography.
5. The Rat Trap, Post Mortem.

the costumes. Such a career not only indicates versatility and brilliance, but also ambition, vivacity, and a capacity for feverish activity.[1]

Mr. Coward's creative life seems to fall into four periods or phases[2] of development. The first phase, the

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1. Mr. John Mason Brown has Richard B. Sheridan say in his letter to Noel Coward, "I salute you as the most versatile talent that in the long history of England's theatre has been an ornament to her stage...No other theatre man in the chronicle of Britain's drama has brought to her stage so surprising an assortment of theatrical talents as you have done..." But, he adds, "We must aim more at excelling than we do at amazing if it is our ambition to outlast the moment of our triumph...," Letters from Green Room Ghosts, New York: Viking Press, 1927, p. 137.

2. FIRST PHASE
I'll Leave It to You (1920)
The Young Idea (1924)
The Rat Trap (1924)
SECOND PHASE
The Vortex (1924)
Fallen Angels (1925)
Hay Fever (1925)
Easy Virtue (1925)
The Queen Was in the Parlour (1926)
Home Chat (1927)
The Marquise (1927)
Sirocco (1927)
This Was a Man (1927)
THIRD PHASE
This Year of Grace (1929) (produced but not published)
Words and Music (1932) " " " "
Bitter Sweet (1929)
Private Lives (1930)
Post Mortem (1931)
Cavalcade (1932)
Design for Living (1933)
FOURTH PHASE
Pointe Valaine (1935)
Conversation Piece (1934)
To-night at 8:30 (1936) (one-act plays)
Set to Music (1939) (produced but not published)
Present Indicative (1937) (autobiography)
To Step Aside (1939) (short stories)

practice period, includes three plays; two of these are light comedies of manners[1] which enjoyed considerable success in production, the third is a serious drama which has never been produced.[2] In this early phase we see the prognosis of Mr. Coward's creative endeavors, for he has always been more successful in the field of light comedy than he has been in the field of serious drama. These early plays are significant in that they introduce most of the elements of his formula for the comedy of manners, though they are not found in each play, and they do not at any time achieve the perfect fusion of his later work. They do not show the elements of balance evidenced in the later plays.

The nine plays of the second phase, six of which are comedies of manners,[3] show considerable advance over those of the early phase in ease of execution and mastery of plot and dialogue; they differ from the plays of the early phase in subject matter and tone. In the comedies of manners of the first phase, Mr. Coward reflects gaily the upper stratum

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1. I'll Leave It to You.
   The Young Idea.
2. The Rat Trap.
3. The Vortex.
   Fallen Angels.
   Hay Fever.
   Easy Virtue.
   Home Chat.
   This Was a Man.

of society, but sex and amorous intrigues are not the main issues of the subject matter; in most of the comedies of manners of the second phase sex and amorous intrigue receive by far the major emphasis.[1] They also reflect his strongest period of disillusionment and bitterness. This second phase is important in that it indicates Mr. Coward's intense efforts to find a dramatic formula for the purpose of satirical enlightenment. At this time, he deplores the "desire of the British public to be amused and not enlightened."[2] He had not then learned that enlightenment and amusement may swing merrily along together.

The third phase which represents thus far Mr. Coward's greatest creative and most versatile period includes several types of dramas: musical revue,[3] operetta,[4] spectacle,[5] his two best comedies of manners,[6] and a serious psychological play apropos of the world war[7] (this has never been produced).

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1. We find this in all the plays of this phase except Hay Fever (a comedy of manners) and the romantic plays, The Queen Was in the Parlour and The Marquise.

2. Mr. Homer E. Woodbridge says, "In his [Coward's] introduction to Three Plays he laments the "desire of the British public to be amused and not enlightened." "Noel Coward," The South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. 37, July 1938, p. 239.

3. This Year of Grace.
   Words and Music.
4. Bitter Sweet.
5. Cavalcade.
6. Private Lives.
   Design for Living.
7. Post Mortem.

In regard to the comedy of manners, this third phase is a glorious resume of all that Mr. Coward tried to do previously; the two comedies of manners, Private Lives and Design for Living, manifest a glittering perfection, a perfect and harmonious fusion of all the elements of his formula toward which he had made such tremendous efforts in the first two periods of endeavor. This period represents the apotheosis of his career not only in the comedy of manners, but also in his other dramatic ventures.

The fourth phase includes the productions of the last five years, from 1934 to the present time. This last phase on the whole indicates decline; there is only one full length drama,[1] one romantic musicale,[2] a series of nine one-act plays,[3] and a new revue[4] which opened in New York last winter. The one-act plays are very good, and among them are several excellent comedies of manners,[5] but the long plays fall short of those of the previous phase.

Mr. Coward's creative life falls easily into these four phases of chronological development which we have just

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1. Pointe Valaine.
2. Conversation Piece.
3. To-night at 8:30.
4. Set to Music.
5. We Were Dancing.
   Hands Across the Sea.
   Ways and Means.

outlined, and the aspects of his life which bear upon his comedy of manners are apparent in the plays of each phase. But his social background affected his comedy of manners more than anything else. For this reason, let us review briefly the nature of his social background and his social career.

Mr. Coward wrote more in reaction to his social background than as a result of it. In view of his early background and environment, it seems a little surprising that he could reach the pinnacle of achievement in the field of high comedy, or the comedy of manners. But, as a child, he carefully observed the suburban surroundings of his environment; he noted the dull, respectable monotony and the regularity of life in such a social set-up, These observations he stored in his mind. Because of his precocity, brilliance and ambition, he was able to receive at a very early age entree to society by nature more sophisticated than that to which he had been born. In his comedies of manners he mirrors this new society to which he obtained entree and also he satirizes the smug respectability of the middle class suburbanites.

Mr. Coward gives in Present Indicative many vivid accounts of his close association with aristocratic, wealthy, sophisticated society. His first introduction to high society

came at the age of sixteen. Following a brief stay at a tubercular sanitorium, he was invited to the home of Mrs. Astley Cooper, a very wealthy society woman. Of this visit, he says, "Mrs. Cooper was gay company...It was a pleasant experience staying in a well-run country house. The trappings of life there were new to me."[1] Further, he says:

> It must not be imagined that Mrs. Cooper was my only contact with the shires. She was the first, but by no means the last. She, it is true, Sir Peter'd me into that bleak, horse-infested paradise, but once inside, I fended for myself. Other country houses opened welcoming doors to me...Witham-on-the-Hill was one of my pleasantest excursions. It was a lovely old house, richly ordered, and belonging to the Keld Fenwicks. I was invited there, oddly enough, for a 'shoot' ...The evenings might have been a trifle dull for me if I had not been so enchanted with the authenticity of the atmosphere. The setting and the dialogue were perfect, the character performance superb, and there seemed to be, only every now and then, a suspicion of over acting among the smaller parts.[2]

Mr. Coward has known society life not only in England, but in many places of the world. Much of the time he has been the guest of the well-to-do folk in many places. He says, "So many of my earlier days seem to have been spent in a state of extreme penury among the very rich."[3] He tells of being the guest of Elsa Maxwell at Venice, and says that he found it

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1. Present Indicative, p. 50.
2. Ibid., p. 106. The Quotation suggests The Young Idea.
3. Ibid., p. 181.

pleasant to be a "gigolo, unimpaired by amatory obligations."[1] In view of his taste for the elegant and the decorative sides of life, this penurious state of his early youth may have been somewhat of a strain and may therefore account for some of the cynicism found in his early plays of the first two phases. What he says of his writing at the age of twenty suggests the plays to follow:

> I flung aside all bastard whimsies and concentrated on realism. No pert elf or faun dared even to peep around a tree at me in 1919. Pan and Pierrot retired, disgruntled, into oblivion as far as I was concerned, and, I am glad to say, have remained there until this day. My mind, not unnaturally, jumped over-far in the opposite direction. I dealt, almost exclusively, with the most lurid types; tarts, pimps, sinister courtesans, and cynical adulterers whirled across my pages in great profusion...[2]

Mr. Coward's social life and background furnish the subject matter and settings for his comedies of manners. In the social life about him, he sees not only material for his plays, but actually drama itself. The world of society is not a real world to him; it is only a part of his theatrical world. Although eager to shine at any social function and well able to be as popular as he wished to be at any given moment, Mr. Coward never abandons himself completely to the

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1. Ibid., p. 160.
2. Ibid., p. 107.

events about him. He is first and always a man of the theatre. Of a time spent at Deauville, as a guest, he says:

> I enjoyed myself watching people lose thousands at baccarat, and inventing thrilling dreams in which I suddenly found a mille-franc plaque under somebody's chair, sat down immediately at the big table, and in the course of a few hours won a vast fortune amid an envious crowd of onlookers...
>
> Large dinners were given nightly in the Casino and certain private social dramas among the party enlivened the hours until dawn. I felt that I was seeing a side of life which should by rights be glamorous to eyes unfamiliar with it; all the correct adjuncts were there. Champagne. Beautifully gowned women. High powered gambling. Obsequious maîtres d'hôtel. Moonlit terraces. A perfectly arranged production with all the parts well cast according to type. I think perhaps that there must have been something wrong with the dialogue.[1]

Echoes of such a social gathering, both as to subject matter and setting are found in many of his comedies of manners in all the phases of his dramatic career; we find them especially in The Young Idea, The Vortex, Fallen Angels, Private Lives and Design for Living.

We sometimes receive the impression that Mr. Coward considers himself an actor in the drama of the social events about him. He says:

> I went to a lot of lunch parties in the most charming houses, which, in retrospect, appear all to be exactly the same...I have a uniform

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1. Ibid., p. 181.

> memory of pickled oak, modern paintings, green walls, a strong aroma of recently burned 'Tantivy' from 'Floris'...I loved answering the questions put to me by eminent politicians. I loved noting that fleeting look of pleased surprise in people's eyes when it was suddenly brought to their attention that, in spite of theatrical success, and excessive publicity, I was really quite pleasant and unaffected. This of course was all nonsense, but I was at least no more affected than anyone else... I think possibly what surprised them was that I could play the game as well as they could, but then, after all, I had learned many different parts by heart long before I had ever met them.[1]

Mr. Coward's social life on a high scale furnishes much insight to the subject matter and settings of his plays, but for his treatment of and attitude toward that subject matter, we shall have to consider other aspects of his life. Much depends upon an understanding of the inner nature of the man himself and his reactions to life and society and the forces at work in the world of his day.

It seems to me that the world war and its aftermath -- and I am not alone in my opinion[2] -- had a very definite and

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1. Ibid., p. 204.

2. Mr. J. C. Furnas says that we must "consider him as a lens through which to study the post-war world," that his plays were an "invaluable cross section of that world," that he expressed a "frenetic horror of the galvanic tinselled recklessness of the world that succeeded the war." He says that The Vortex is the most neurotic of all plays about the morning after the world war. He says further, "Beneath his occasional masks of gaiety, he is obsessed with the spectacle of post operative shock as it affects both the elder and the younger generation." "The Art of Noel Coward," The Fortnightly Review, Vol. 140, December 1933, p. 709.

Mr. Homer E. Woodbridge states that Mr. Coward inconsistently denies that he was scarred by the war. He says, "However this may be, it seems clear that his temper as a writer was determined by the crash of hopes and aspirations which followed it." Op. cit., p. 240.

severe effect upon Mr. Coward personally and also upon his dramatic creations. The intense vigor of his denial is, I think, hardly convincing:

> I have noticed just lately, a certain tendency among contemporary journalistic writers to class me with the generation that was 'ineradicably scarred by the war.' They have found upon analyzing my plays, a sense of profound disillusionment, a dreadful nerve-wracking cynicism, obviously the heritage of those four black years, and I have searched myself carefully to discover any grounds for believing this dramatic implication to be true. I have found none. I was not in the least scarred by the war. It was little more to me at the time than a dully oppressive background, and although I certainly acquired a few nasty scratches from the years immediately following it, the reasons for my warped disenchantment with life must be sought elsewhere.[1]

Part II of Mr. Coward's autobiography, in which he describes his experiences in the war, is the most intense and emotional portion of the book. In fact, the whole tone of this part of the book is so different from the rest, it is a little difficult to believe that it is by the same author. His acute sensitiveness to his experiences received while serving in the army are vividly described, and had he felt less keenly about it, he would not have been able to write in such an agitated manner. It seems that he resents so bitterly any hint or accusation as to his being a coward or weakling in regard to

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1. Present Indicative, p. 101.

his sensitiveness to the war and its after effects that he is unwilling to admit or to see to what extent the war actually did affect him and his dramatic creations. Certainly a young man of his generation with his intensity and acuity could not help absorbing the necessary resultants of war in some of its phases. I cannot fully understand his reason for such a strong denial. He is ambitious for artistic integrity; perhaps he feels that an interpretation of his plays in terms of the war and its effect upon him is a violation to that integrity. Too, I think, in Present Indicative, he makes a very definite effort to explode the idea of himself as a legendary figure of the modern dandy; perhaps his denial of the effect of the war upon him ties up in some slight way with this desire. Anyone who might read Post Mortem would definitely feel that the author of the play was not only "scarred" by the war, but actually seared by it as well. Such lines as the following are indicative only in a measure of the tone of the whole play:

> John: ...The civilian public must enjoy its war; and it also has to reconcile it with a strong sense of patriotism and a nice Christian God. It couldn't do that if it had the remotest suspicion of what really happens.
>
> Perry: Do you think it will ever know?
>
> John: I hope so, later on, much later, when it's all over.
>
> Perry: (violently) Never, never, never! They'll never know whichever way it goes,

> victory or defeat. They'll smarm it all over with memorials and Rolls of Honour and Angels of Mons, and it'll look so noble and glorious in retrospect that they'll all start itching for another war, egged on by dear old gentlemen in clubs who wish they were twenty years younger, and newspaper owners and oily financiers, and the splendid women of England happy and proud to give their sons and husbands and lovers, and even their photographs. You see, there'll be an outbreak of war literature in so many years. Everyone will write war books and war plays, and every one will be vicariously thrilled by them, until one day someone will go too far and say something that's really true and be flung into prison for blasphemy, immorality, lese majesty, unnatural vice, contempt of court, and atheism, then there'll be a glorious religious revival, and we'll all be rushed across the Atlantic to conquer America, comfortably upheld by Jesus and the right! (i, 356-357)

And again:

> John: ... We can none of us afford a personal view out here, we're not strong enough - no one is strong enough. There's just a limited number of things we can bear to think about: sleep, warmth, food, drink, self preservation: no more than that.
>
> Perry: Voluntary reversion to animalism.
>
> John: Not voluntary, compulsory.
>
> Perry: Aren't you touched by it anymore? Not now, I don't mean now, when everything's comparatively quiet, but when we're in the thick of it, floundering through the mud in an attack, treading on men's faces, some of them not dead, with the bloody din of the barrage in our ears, and thin human screams cutting through it - quite clearly like penny whistles in a sudden storm.

> John: I'm all right then - too much to do, no time.
>
> Perry: What about when it's all over and we fall back sometimes, back over that idiotic ground, having to go quickly, not hearing people groaning or crying for water - when we flop down in a dugout, safe, for the moment, time to think then, isn't there, can you help think then? (i, 358)

Mr. Coward says that his emotions were violent when he wrote Post Mortem.[1] If the war were not more than "dully oppressive" background, how could he ever have created Cavalcade containing such lines as the following:

> Jane: Drink to the war, then, if you want to. I can't. Rule Britannia! Send us victorious, happy and glorious! Drink, Joey, you're only a baby, still, but you're old enough for war. Drink like the Germans are drinking, to Victory and Defeat, and stupid tragic sorrow. But leave me out of it, please! (Part II, i, 166)

Mr. Coward certainly obtained his material for his "warped disenchantment" - if not his reasons - in the post-war conditions about him. We find reflected in many of his comedies of manners the characteristic young folk of the jazz age, a product of the post-war era. These young people reflect the restlessness, the cynicism, the neurosis, the boredom, the degeneracy, the sophistication and the sense of futility, all

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1. Play Parade, Intro., p. xiv.

products of the chaotic moral and economic conditions of the post-war world. In his first play, I'll Leave It to You, we see a family of young people who are for the first time in their lives faced with the economic necessity of earning their own livings, a condition brought about by the changing standards of the post-war era. These young people flounder about like fish out of water in their efforts to adjust themselves to the new conditions of their world. In The Vortex, we find a group of people unmistakably representative of the jazz age. They are either neurotic, cynical, degenerate, sophisticated, bored or maladjusted to the chaotic conditions of their world. Such types as these were not frequent in the pre-war society of England. Mr. Coward in Cavalcade makes a plea for an England of the pre-war era when degeneracy was not an ear mark of society, and when there was peace, quiet and calm:

> Jane: ... Now then let's couple the future of England with the past of England...Let's drink to our sons who made part of the pattern and to our hearts that died with them. Let's drink to the spirit of gallantry and courage that made a strange Heaven out of unbelievable Hell, and let's drink to the hope that one day this country of ours, which we love so much, will find dignity and greatness and peace again. (Part III, 1, 177)

And in a song, "Twentieth Century Blues" from Cavalcade we find:

Why is it that civilized humanity
Must make the world so wrong,
In this hurly burly of insanity,
Your dreams cannot last long...

Why, if there's a God in the sky, why
shouldn't he grin?
High above this dreary Twentieth Century din,
In this strange illusion,
Chaos and confusion,
People seem to lose their way.
What is there to strive for,
Love or keep alive for? Say...(Part III, i, 177-179)

Mr. Coward does not explain in his autobiography the reasons for his "warped disenchantment," his bitterness and his cynicism. His account is mostly of his theatrical career; he relates in great detail his struggles to the top, his humiliations and his triumphs. Too, while his theatrical training affords him excellent background as a dramatist, it does not explain his bent toward light social comedy. Surely there is little in his theatrical career that could cause disillusionment or bitterness, for while he worked very hard and suffered reverses, on the whole his success has been rapid and phenomenal. His account indicates that his failures and hard knocks did not embitter him, but rather spurred him on to greater and richer endeavors. Such a rapid rise on the ladder of social prestige as he has known would generally indicate optimism rather than pessimism; and aside from the fact that he has had a slight tendency toward tuberculosis, a thing which he has carefully watched and which has not

depressed him greatly, he has enjoyed good health. Some probing into the inner nature of the man and his psychological reactions to the conditions of his world may throw some light upon the link between the pattern of his life and his interest in the comedy of manners.

Mr. Coward shows throughout the account of his life an acute sensitiveness toward the tragic and the more dreary aspects of his life. He does not attempt to dodge a consideration of the tragic elements of life, but tries to understand the reason for them. His sensitiveness to the war, to the death of several friends, and to the sufferings of tubercular patients whom he observed closely, is very poignant. While he tells his story with abundant good humor, there runs underneath a constant current of seriousness and a searching penetration as to the meaning and purpose of life.

Coupled with his searching attitude, his acute powers of observation, and his sensitiveness, he manifests a seething restlessness and impatience, and a vast amount of nervous energy.

As he observes closely the various phases of society, he is appalled by the waste and apparent emptiness and superficiality of people. They seem to get nowhere and aim for little beyond a shining brilliance of social etiquette. He feels very deeply that there should be more purpose to life

than that which is apparent in the neurotic post war aristocracy. He hates the sham, the artificiality, and the unthinking acceptance of the codes of morality. We find such lines as the following in Post Mortem which are illustrative:

> Perry: ...Nothing's happening really. There are strides being made forward in science and equal strides being made backwards in hypocrisy. People are just the same; individually pleasant and collectively idiotic. Machinery is growing magnificently, people paint pictures of it and compose ballets about it, the artists are cottoning on to that very quickly because they're scared that soon there won't be any other sort of beauty left, and they'll be stranded with nothing to paint and nothing to write. Religion is doing very well. The Catholic Church still tops the bill as far as finance and general efficiency go. The Church of England is still staggering along without much conviction. The Evangelists are screeching as usual and sending out missionaries. All the other sects are flourishing about equally. Christian Science is coming up smiling, a slightly superior smile, but always a smile. God is Love, there is no pain. Pain is error. Everything that isn't love is error; like hell it is. Politically all is confusion, but that's nothing new. There's still poverty, unemployment, pain, greed, cruelty, passion and crime. There's still meanness, jealousy, money and disease. The competitive sporting spirit is being admirably fostered, particularly as regards the Olympic games. A superb preparation for the next war, fully realized by everyone but the public that will be involved. The newspapers still lie over anything of importance, and the majority still believes them implicitly...(vi, 395)

It seems to me that the reason for Mr. Coward's cynicism

and bitterness lies in the fact that he is very ambitious for artistic integrity. While his account shows a healthy amount of self respect and at times an air of superiority and conceit, it also shows a realization and a questioning of his own limitations. Some of the seeds of his bitterness may be found in the fact that he himself does not feel satisfied that he has obtained the peak of artistic creation toward which he had aimed. He has worked hard, very much harder than the average artist; he has shown considerable versatility in many directions; he has cultivated and developed his talents to the best of his ability, but he is not completely satisfied with the results. His search for a true and an adequate understanding of his worth gives insight to his character. He says:

> There seemed no criteria by which I could judge my quality, or, rather, so many criteria that they nullified each other. How, from all the written and spoken praise, blame, admiration, envy, prejudice, malice, kindness and contempt that these last few years had brought me, could I abstract a little of what was really true. Which of all those critical minds had been the most unbiased - nearest to hitting the nail on the head? How much had the precipitate flamboyance of my success prejudiced not only those who criticized my work, but the work itself. In fact, where was I and what was I? Had I done what I thought I'd done or what others thought I'd done. Was my talent real, deeply flowing, capable of steady growth and ultimate maturity? Or was it the evanescent sleight of hand that many believed it to be; an amusing drawing room flair, adroit enough to skim a certain immediate

> acclaim from the surface of life but with no roots in experience and no potentialities.[1]

Mr. Coward does not answer these questions. He does not seem satisfied or he would not question in such a searching manner. While often he has worked too rapidly, and admits it, on the whole he has done his best; and if that best is not satisfying to himself or to his critics as to the fulfillments of artistic integrity, such a realization might bring to him that sense of cynicism and bitterness reflected in his plays.

Too, he complains that he is unable to express the beauty of a landscape. He says of his mind:

> It is at its best when dealing with people, and at its worst when dealing with the inanimate. Its photographic propensities are good, but something goes wrong with the developing, because the pictures it takes of landscapes and seascapes fade too easily. Faces, events, and tunes remain clear, fragments of past conversations, also, and the sudden, stinging memory of long-dead emotions. But visual experience, that glorious view when you reach the top of the hill, that moment in the Acropolis just before sunset, those pale dawns at sea, all these become smudged and half rubbed out, until, frequently, not even an outline remains.[2]

It seems that Mr. Coward's main purpose in writing Present Indicative, aside from demonstrating his skill in the

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1. Present Indicative, p. 315.
2. Ibid., p. 331.

writing of a gently ironical prose, is to present a more serious picture of his character than that which is generally associated with him in the public mind. He seriously tries to analyse his own worth. He says:

> I am neither stupid nor scared, and my sense of my own importance to the world is relatively small. On the other hand, my sense of my own importance to myself is tremendous. I am all I have, to work with, to play with, to suffer and to enjoy. It is not the eyes of others that I am wary of, but my own. I do not intend to let myself down more than I can possibly help, and I find that the fewer illusions that I have about me or the world around me, the better company I am for myself.[1]

And again:

> My nervous energy, always excessive, had carried me far. My determination, ambition, and almost hysterical industry had been rewarded generously, perhaps too generously... There were the demands I had made, miraculously granted, looking a bit smug. Most of my gift horses seemed to have bad teeth - and now what? [2]

But now let us consider the impression which he has made upon the public mind which is quite different from the one which we have just presented, and the one which he stresses in Present Indicative. Mr. Coward had, during the Twenties,

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1. Ibid., p. 199.
2. Ibid., p. 314.

built up in the minds of the British and American public the conception of a legendary figure who had flown into fame over night, a modern dandy, a poseur, a wit, a raconteur, a superficial young man who could be gay, debonair, smug or bantering. Mr. Coward attempts to explain somewhat apologetically how he obtained this impression, at the age of twenty-five:

> No Press interviewer, photographer or gossip writer had to fight in order to see me, I was wide open to them all; smiling and burbling bright witticisms, giving my views on this and that, discussing such problems as whether or not the modern girl would make a good mother, or what would be my ideal in a wife. My opinion was asked for, and given, on current books and plays. I made a few adequately witty jokes which were immediately misquoted or twisted around the wrong way, thereby denuding them of any humour they might originally have had. I was photographed in every conceivable position. Not only was I photographed, my rooms in Ebury Street were photographed...I took to wearing coloured turtle-necked jerseys, actually more for comfort than for effect, and soon I was informed by my evening paper that I had started a fashion... 'How does it feel,' they cried, 'to be a genius?' To reply to this sort of remark without either complacency or offensive modesty was impossible, and so I chose the latter as being the less troublesome course and wore a permanent blush of self-deprecation for quite a long while. I can indeed still call it into use if necessary. Sometimes I became so carried away by my performance that I alluded to my success as luck! This monumental insincerity was received with acclaim. People were actually willing and eager to believe that I could throw out of my mind all memories of heartbreaks, struggles, disillusionments, bitter disappointments, and work, and dismiss my hard-

> earned victory as luck. Just glorious luck. An encouraging pat on the back from kindly fate.[1]

Again he says:

> I ordered new chintz curtains for my sitting room, and had my bedroom done over in pillar-box scarlet, a decision which I afterwards regretted...There were two pink nudes over the fireplace...It was in the midst of this misguided splendor that I was unwise enough to be photographed in bed wearing a Chinese dressing gown and an expression of advanced degeneracy. This last was accidental and was caused by blinking at the flashlight, but it emblazoned my unquestionable decadence firmly on to the minds of all who saw it...[2]

He further recounts the many plutocratic thrills he received from riding about in his vintage Rolls-Royce. This, he infers, also added to the impression he had created of a modern dandy and poseur.

Although Mr. Coward credits his reputation in this light to the follies and extravagances of his youth, and attempts to present himself to the world as a very serious person and a deep thinker, he has not been always convincing. There is yet the ring of the superficial and the theatrical in what he has to say despite his sincere efforts to be honest and true in his reflections. After all the whole pattern of his life is theatrical; and the defenses which he

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1. Ibid., p. 198.
2. Ibid., p. 203.

presents to refute the statements of his critics or the impressions he has made in the public eye cannot be depended upon too accurately, for he cannot escape the theatrical qualities of his make-up.

Although he has tried to present a more serious aspect of his nature than that which is generally associated with him, the majority of his critics and associates present a picture of him which suggests the lighter surfaces of life. Mr. St. John Ervine writes of him in an otherwise sympathetic review of his autobiography:

> I am amazed and disturbed at the slenderness of his intellectual resources. If we had no other knowledge of him than is contained in this book, we might well wonder whether he had ever read a great book, seen a fine picture or a notable play, listened to music of worth, observed a piece of sculpture, or taken an interest in even the common places of a cultured man's life. His entire existence has been spent in a corner of the theatre remote from the general contacts of everyday life.[1]

Mr. George Jean Nathan says:

> [His plays], light or attemptedly serious, give off little but the cigarette smoke of cozy corner philosophy, the superficial observations of a man who has gracefully gone through life on grease paint roller skates, the point of view of a writer whose mind and heart have mingled chiefly with the people of the fashionable theatre and with that theatre's hangers-on.

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1. Quoted by Mr. George Jean Nathan in "Status as a Dramatist," Saturday Review of Literature, April 17, 1937, p. 16.

> Never in any of his plays, even in the best of his comedies, is there the slenderest trace of a culture that has edged below that of a gay dinner party conversation, of a knowledge that has dug deeper than information about the appointments of the great ocean liners, the service at the Ritz, and the peregrinations of the Duke of Westminster...[1]

Further Mr. Nathan explains why, in his opinion, Mr. Coward is not successful in his more serious work. He says that he has been spoiled and led astray by his critics who have encouraged in him a false sense of ability to write the kind of drama for which he has neither the equipment or the talent. He says that when he leaves off observing men and women dressed in fashionable attire and observes instead men and women undressed by natural emotions and baring their innermost thoughts and hearts, he reveals himself in the humorous light of a small baffled child, or a ridiculous amateur.[2]

Recently I had the pleasure of hearing Elsa Maxwell speak from a lecture platform.[3] During the question and answer session I asked her to tell something of the personality of Noel Coward, to whom she had referred quite frequently in her lecture. She stated that she knew him very well, that he is a charming, brilliant, witty, debonair person, a delightful companion and a very warm friend. There was nothing in

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1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Memorial Auditorium, Louisville, Ky., October 4, 1939.

her discussion of his personality to indicate any serious aspects to his nature. But, of course, Elsa Maxwell is much the same type of sophisticated person as Mr. Coward.

Arnold Bennett, who knew Mr. Coward quite well personally, in a very brief novel, Stroke of Luck, has presented a character which is very suggestive of the legendary Noel Coward. It is possible that Mr. Coward furnished him with the inspiration for the character. Mr. St. John Ervine ties up the impression Mr. Coward has made as a legendary figure like the one pictured in Stroke of Luck with Mr. Coward's character creations in his plays. He says, "The fact that Mr. Coward filled his plays with the dismally bright young caused many persons, otherwise intelligent, to suppose that he himself was dismally bright. He became a legendary figure."[1] But from the impression which he has made in the public eye, he suggests the prototype of any of the sophisticated gentlemen in his plays. Like them, he is witty, nonchalant and worldly-wise.

Mr. James Agate, a London dramatic critic, adds to the impression of Mr. Coward as a less serious personality. He says:

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1. Ervine, St. John, "The Plays of Mr. Noel Coward," in Royal Society of Literature, Essays by Divers Hands, London: Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 70.

> Mr. Coward has been blamed for his conceit and praised for his modesty. He is said in turn to be arrogant, unassuming, self-centered, warm hearted, a soured cynic and an amused commentator. His best jokes are superb, but he has even more success with the poor ones. The least of his bon-mots is at once sent the round as the latest Noelism.[1]

From these impressions, coupled with those we receive from what Mr. Coward tells us in Present Indicative, we must draw our conclusions as to his personality. It seems to me that, though he is, no doubt, a superficial, theatrical person; he is also a person of some depth. His reaction to the war, his sensitiveness to the conditions of the post-war world, his honest, searching analysis of his own worth, and a very deep capacity for friendship are hardly superficial qualities. At any rate, the effect of the war upon him, his reaction to society, and his own character analysis explain in part at least the cynical quality of his plays. His theatrical make-up and the superficial gaiety of his personality explain his bent for light social comedy. He is curiously both in and out of sympathy with his time. He can be almost dazzled by the smarter aspects of post-war society, and at the same time experience a sense of revulsion for the jazz age behavior.

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1. Agate, James, "The Ingenium of Noel Coward," My Theatre Talks, London: Arthur Baker Ltd., n.d., p. 188.

Mr. Coward gives in his autobiography considerable space to the people who influenced him in his life. He mentions many celebrities, but he also mentions many people who are comparatively unknown. It is not easy to judge to what extent, if any, the people he knew influenced his writing, or to select those who may have influenced him in this direction. He says that Gilbert Miller taught him much about play construction.[1] He admits a certain amount of his sophistication was obtained through companionship with a childhood friend, Esme Wynne. He says:

> I was Poj and she was Stoj. We alternated between childishness and strange maturity. The theatre had led us far in precocity and we discussed life and death and sex and religion with sublime sophistication...We even had baths together for the simple reason that we didn't wish to waste a moment's companionship and because it seemed affected to stop short in the middle of some vital discussion for such a paltry reason as conventional modesty...We read a lot of Oscar Wilde and Omar Khayam and Laurence Hope...[2]

Aside from furnishing him with encouragement, faith, and sometimes money, his friends had actually little direct bearing upon his dramatic creations. There is little evidence that he characterizes any of his friends or associates in his plays; this is due to the fact that he is more adept with the use of types than with character creation. The men who seem to have

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1. Present Indicative, p. 105.
2. Ibid., pp. 33-34.

exerted the greatest influence upon him in a personal way and as an actor were his directors, Basil Dean and Charles Hawtrey. His tribute to the latter shows generosity and gratitude:

> Hawtrey knew a whole lot of things that other managers never even suspected. He knew how to bring out young talent without storming and bullying. He knew how to conduct the most irritating rehearsals without sacrificing one atom of his dignity or authority. He also knew that very youthful actors were frequently victimized by their own frustrated conceits, and that to deal harshly with them might crush down their small confidence and suffocate any genuine talent they might have. He had humour and kindliness, and a sure expert knowledge of the theatre, and he managed without apparent effort, to be much beloved. It is one of my lasting regrets that he died before I had time to justify a little his faith in me.[1]

Mr. Coward's account is abundant with tributes such as the above to many of his friends. His capacity for friendship is one of his most charming qualities.

He especially honors some of his friends by writing plays for them. He wrote Private Lives as a vehicle for Gertrude Lawrence and for himself. He met Miss Lawrence when he was eleven years old; they acted together in their first play. Throughout their lives they have been devoted friends and kindred spirits, and have been almost constantly associated in the theatre. Of her, he says:

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1. Ibid., p. 70.

> I know her well, better, I believe than most people. The early years of our friendship set her strongly in my mind. I knew her then to have quick humour, insane generosity, and a loving heart, and those things seldom change. I see her now, ages away from her ringlets and black velvet military cap, sometimes a simple wide-eyed child, sometimes a glamorous femme du monde, at some moments a rather boisterous "good sort," at others a weary, disillusioned woman battered by life, but gallant to the last. There are many other grades also between these extremes. She appropriated beauty to herself quite early, along with all the tricks and mannerisms that go with it. In adolescence she was barely pretty. Now, without apparent effort, she gives the impression of sheer loveliness. Her grace in movement is exquisite and her voice charming. To disentangle Gertie herself from this mutability is baffling, rather like delving for your grandmother's gold locket at the bottom of an overflowing jewel-case.[1]

He wrote Design for Living for Lynn Fontaine and Alfred Lunt whom he met in his early visits to New York.[2] He met them before their marriage when they were all very poor and not very well known. He spent much time with them and admired them tremendously; they represent the type of people which Mr. Coward can draw very accurately; they are theatrical, sophisticated, aloof, ingenious, and subtle. He wrote Home Chat for Madge Titheradge,[3] another actress whom he met in his childhood. He says that he admired her deep voice and alert charm. These sophisticated personalities for whom Mr. Coward wrote many of his plays must have impressed him

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1. Ibid., p. 337.
2. Play Parade, Intro., p. xv.
3. Present Indicative, p. 48.

very much; it is indeed unusual to find a dramatist who writes specifically for certain people.

Mr. Coward says little about the sources of his plays, but it seems to me that what little he says furnishes the key to those who influence him the most. He mentions that he read at an early age Oscar Wilde.[1] Not only does Mr. Coward's personality suggest that of Wilde, but the dialogue and the style of his plays is reminiscent of Wilde. He admits a certain debt to Pinero when he says that his purpose in writing Easy Virtue was to "adapt a story (that of the Second Mrs. Tanqueray), intrinsically Pinero in theme and structure, to present-day behavior; to compare the déclassée woman of to-day with the more flamboyant demi-mondaine of the nineties."[2] The structure of Mr. Coward's plays show marked similarities to that of Pinero who used the structural pattern of the "well-made" play. Mr. Coward says that The Young Idea was "primarily inspired by Shaw's You Never Can Tell," that Dolly and Philip were the original prototypes of Gerda and Sholto.[3] Mr. Coward is highly suggestive of Shaw in his social criticism and satire. He is proud to mention his acquaintance with Somerset Maugham, whose plays show marked similarity to his own. The Vortex is somewhat suggestive of Maugham's Our Betters.

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1. Ibid., p. 121.
2. Ibid., p. 229.
3. Ibid., p. 97.

Mr. Coward's plays show the influence of his predecessors, Congreve and his contemporaries, and Sheridan; but their influence is less apparent than that of his contemporaries. Like them he mirrors the world of the aristocracy in dazzling, satirical brilliance. They have influenced his style; he has taken from their formulas what he could adapt to present day standards. He has attempted to incorporate the best from both his predecessors and his contemporaries in his comedies of manners. In our chapters on the analysis of his formula, these influences will be indicated from time to time.

Too, Mr. Coward says little about the sources of his inspiration for his plays. He says that his frequent visits to the home of the Hartley Manners were his inspiration for Hay Fever, which he wrote in reaction to Easy Virtue.[1] He speaks of the arguments in the Manners home which remind us of those of the family in the play:

> They were waged entirely among the family, and frequently ended in all four of them leaving the room and retiring upstairs, where, later on, they might be discovered, by any guest bold enough to go in search of them, amicably drinking tea in the kitchen.[2]

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1. Ibid., p. 170.
2. Ibid., p. 136.

He says that he wrote I'll Leave It to You[1] at Gilbert Miller's request and from his idea, and that he wrote The Rat Trap[2] because of his encouragement. His primary purpose in writing The Vortex[3] was to write a good part for himself. He says that the only motivation which he had for creating Bitter Sweet[4] was to write a romantic operetta, and that for Cavalcade[5] he felt an urge to test his producing powers on a large scale. One feels that the sources of Mr. Coward's inspiration are much deeper than he himself indicates. What he has to say of them is merely an expression of his sophisticated personality.

The places of his travels, which began at the age of twenty-six when he first went to Paris, are often reflected in Mr. Coward's plays. Most of them, however, are set in English homes. Design for Living reflects his cosmopolitan experiences; the sets of the play are laid on London, Paris and New York. Private Lives, though about English people, is set in France and Paris. Bitter Sweet finds some of its settings in Vienna, and reflects Viennese life. All the sets of Sirocco are laid in Italy; Mr. Coward says he received his

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1. Ibid., p. 114.
2. Ibid., p. 105
3. Play Parade, Intro., p. x.
4. Present Indicative, p. 286.
5. Ibid., p. 340.

inspiration for the play from a fiesta that he attended while at Alassio, Italy. The Young Idea, having one scene in Italy, also reflects continental life. Easy Virtue, though set in England, indicates continental influence by the character of Larita who has lived on the Continent. Pointe Valaine with its tropical setting suggests his visit to Honolulu. The one-act play, We Were Dancing, has its setting in Samolo. The Marquise, with settings in France, is quite French in tone. The Queen Was in the Parlour suggests some small monarchial country of Europe which probably impressed Mr. Coward a great deal. The one-act play, Hands Across the Sea, suggests the vastness of his travels.

Our chief concern throughout this chapter has been to point out the influences of Mr. Coward's life which affected his interest in the comedy of manners. Our analysis of his formula which follows affords a keener interest and clarity when we have some knowledge of his personality and background.

PART II CHAPTER I

NOEL COWARD'S CHARACTERIZATION

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-I-

Material of the Inquiry

The purpose of the next four chapters is to analyse Mr. Coward's comedy of manners and its development. For this analysis, it is necessary, first of all, that we determine the plays which are comedies of manners.

If we consider the comedy of manners broadly to embody all of the plays which present in some degree satirical studies of the life of the smart set, we might include thirteen of Mr. Coward's full length plays:

I'll Leave It to You (1920)

The Young Idea (1924)

The Rat Trap (1924)

The Vortex (1924)

Fallen Angels (1925)

Hay Fever (1925)

Easy Virtue (1925)

Home Chat (1927)

Sirocco (1927)

This Was a Man (1927)

Private Lives (1930)

Design for Living (1933)

Pointe Valaine (1935)

All of these plays with the exception of Pointe Valaine have played a part in the development of Mr. Coward's formula for the comedy of manners and will be used in our discussion. Mr. Coward makes no contribution to the comedy of manners in Pointe Valaine; his greatest contribution is made in Private Lives and Design for Living, which preceded it. Pointe Valaine, a mediocre play, is written in the pattern of melodrama and only in so far as it reflects certain phases of sophisticated society and contains satire can it be considered a comedy of manners.

There are other plays in the above list which we feel also elude classification in the comedy of manners. Either they are too serious in tone and content or they do not indicate Mr. Coward's structural pattern for the comedy of manners; but they do play a very real part in the development of his formula. The Rat Trap and Sirocco, though reflecting society in a satirical manner, are melodramatic and serious. The Comic Spirit, essentially a part of the comedy of manners, does not have the upper hand in The Vortex and Easy Virtue. Other plays on the above list also fall short as comedies of manners, but they are important in the development of Mr. Coward's formula for the comedy of manners which attains its most perfect expression in Private Lives and Design for Living.

Six other full length plays from Mr. Coward's pen have been

published.[1] Two of these are romantic pieces: The Queen Was in the Parlour (1926) and The Marquise (1927). The first of these is a melodrama, the last is a comedy. Both contain such elements of the comedy of manners as satire, the Comic Spirit, and splendor of drawing room setting. But the plays do not reflect modern, upper aristocratic society; they are of another age. Nor do they indicate any moralistic intent.

There are two plays apropos of the World War: Post Mortem (1931) and Cavalcade (1932). They are entirely different in content and structural pattern. Post Mortem is a very bitter, violent attack upon the futility of war and the system that makes it possible; it is a serious, psychological study in which metaphysics is employed as a dramatic element. Cavalcade is a spectacle and a musicale reflecting the glory of England in the pre-war days.

Bitter Sweet (1929) and Conversation Piece (1934) are romantic musicales. They are similar in design, but Bitter Sweet has attained a far greater mark of distinction.

The one-act plays, contained in To-night at 8:30 are excellent; but we will not discuss them as they are miniatures of Mr. Coward's various techniques.

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1. Unpublished are several revues and musicales: This Year of Grace (1929), Words and Music (1932), Set to Music (1937).

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Analysis

Noel Coward's formula for the comedy of manners, in its most perfect expression, presents a pattern of skillful, artistic, geometric design. This controlled and balanced formula is characterized by the following elements: type and stock characters reflecting the ultra smart sophisticates of society; brilliant, witty, crisp, colloquial dialogue; a mechanistic design of structure, elegant drawing room settings; and a satirical presentation of the thematic material which is centered about the intimate structure of the post-war aristocratic society.

The characterization of Noel Coward's comedies of manners, which we will discuss in this chapter, consists of the use of type and stock characters, reflecting modern, upper aristocratic society. These he uses for the technical purpose of exposing and mirroring the foibles of society; therefore his interest does not lie in the creation of individual or developing characters, but rather in social portraiture. In the comedy of manners we do not expect the interplay of vital deep emotions or the stirring conflict of passions and wills; we are content with the superficialities, the fluff and the frills of life. The people who wear with ease and a flair of the elegant the Molyneux frocks and the sable and mink coats

are the natural character types of the modern comedy of manners, and it is these whom Mr. Coward deftly draws.[1]

But with few exceptions Mr. Coward's character types are all of a standard pattern and show little differentiation. Among the ultra smart sophisticates of the post-war society, we find often repeated such types as the gay, pert youngsters, wise beyond their years; the modern dandies and ladies of fashion who have little to amuse them beyond the game of sex, demi-mondaine ladies, adulterers, home wreckers; neurotics, degenerates, dope addicts and drunks; witty, worldly wise young people of philosophic bent; and, by way of contrast, the staid and stodgy, the conventional, narrow, hide-bound types found in British and American society.

But Mr. Coward's character types generally have little substance on the written page; they come to life only on the stage when interpreted by skillful performers who can put life and color into the barely outlined sketches. Mr. Coward has written several of his plays for certain actors and

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1. Mr. Coward has shown in Cavalcade (not a comedy of manners) skill in the drawing of types which reflect the more solid and stable folk of British society. Here we find types who exist in most British homes; they are not especially brilliant or clever; they talk as normal people talk. He presents two classes of society, the upper class and the servant group, both of which are devoted to Britain; they are patriotic and loyal to their country first of all, and represent all that is substantial and wholesome in British society.

actresses who he knew would be able to instill into their performances the necessary theatrical finesse to bring the characters to life. He depends upon them to know the necessary shadings and tempo of expression in the dialogue, to be able to use to advantage such theatrical effects as the varied uses of the shrug of a shoulder, the wink of an eye, the wiggle of a foot.

Mr. Coward's chief dramatic technique for making the characters effective is the use of similarities and antitheses in the character types. For example, the children, Gerda and Sholto in The Young Idea, and Simon and Sorel in Hay Fever are exactly alike; Jane and Julia, the wives in Fallen Angels are also alike; Marion in Easy Virtue is the antithesis of Larita. In Private Lives, Amanda and Elyot are similar while Victor and Sibyl, also similar, serve as antitheses to Amanda and Elyot.

The exposition of the character types is revealed by the dialogue chiefly. There is generally considerable bickering among the characters; this we shall discuss in the chapter on the dialogue.

Mr. Coward shows throughout his creative career very little progressive development in the creation of character; the types remain very much the same. In fact, his nearest approach to character creation is found among the plays of

the second phase of his career. But in the later plays the types are made dramatically effective by a very skillful use of similarities and antitheses of the character types. We will discuss the nature of the characterization through the first three phases of Mr. Coward's dramatic career.

The predominant character types in the comedies of manners of the first phase are the bright, pert young folk of the later adolescent years. Mr. Coward himself was of such a type and age at the time of writing these plays, which explains perhaps the fact that these are the most accurate types of these early plays. His first play, I'll Leave It to You, presents a family of well-to-do young people, who, by the improbable schemings of an uncle, arouse themselves to find ways and means of earning their own livings. They are a rather helpless group of youngsters who lack self-reliance and the ability to adjust themselves to the new conditions of the post-war world; but they cover up these weaknesses with flippancy.

The children, Oliver, Sylvia, Bobbie and Joyce, are all very much alike. Mr. Coward distinguishes the one from the other only by their various possible vocations. Bobbie, since Mr. Coward wrote the part for himself, is slightly more impudent than the others. Their inadequacy to meet their

problems and the flippancy they express when confronted by them are illustrated by the following speech of Joyce: "Something wonderful has happened, Oliver...We're ruined. I've just got to order extra tea cakes. Isn't it thrilling?"[1]

The other types of the play are little more than lay figures. Mrs. Dermott suggests the type of mother we find in several of the later plays. She is a rather helpless, self-centered, amusing, dull woman, who has no idea of the problems facing her children nor any ability to help them solve them. Uncle Daniel suggests no more than the typical well-to-do man of the world with a twinkle in his eye and a humanitarian interest in his relatives.

Although the cast of twelve in The Young Idea is composed largely of sophisticated grown-ups, the principal characters are Gerda and Sholto, the children of George Orrent by his first wife. They come from Italy where they reside with their mother to visit their father and his second wife. These children, identically alike, typify not only the Continental mannerisms and attitudes, but also the post-war adolescent youth. They are sophisticated, impudent, plain spoken, and assertive. But despite the fact that the story interest centers about them, they are little more than sketches.

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1. I, p. 15.

In contrast to the children in The Young Idea, Mr. Coward presents a group of typical well-to-do English hunting folk, who are the embodiment of the sophisticated, wealthy, aristocratic society of England. These types are sketchily drawn. Cicely, George's second wife, represents a nasty little woman who thinks she can flirt unnoticed by her husband; George suggests little more than the wronged husband; Roddy is the typical home wrecker.

The character types of these early plays of the practice period reflect gaily the manners and foibles of the social sets which they represent, but in the plays of the second phase Mr. Coward shows considerable progress in the drawing of the character types; in fact the plays of the second phase promise more in the matter of characterization than he has yet fulfilled.

Though satirized, the character types which are most frequent in the plays of the second phase are more serious than any of those found in the first phase. They are often neurotic, degenerate, and at times nauseous and odious. The Vortex, Fallen Angels, Home Chat, Sirocco and This Was a Man are all peopled with worldly, loose-living folk in slightly varying degrees of serious presentation. Easy Virtue presents satirically a group of serious people, but for the most part they are the hide-bound conservatives. Hay Fever is the only

comedy of manners during this phase which contains characters of less serious import; they too reflect the modern worldly sophisticates, but they are sketched with a lighter and more delicate stroke.

The Vortex presents a glittering reflection of the idle, sophisticated, post-war society. The characters are restless, bored, excitable, impatient, intense and neurotic; they are presented in a serious vein, and while often the dialogue is witty, the characters themselves do not incite us to laughter. Among the types presented, Pawnie, "an elderly maiden gentleman,"[1] who reminds us somewhat of Ernest in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, and Helen, the faithful family friend, are the best drawn. Bunty and Tom are the typical Coward characters of amorous intrigue. But Florence and Nicky, the leading characters of the play, are more than types; they are individuals and approach the creation of real flesh and blood characters. Nicky, who suggests Hamlet, is perhaps the most living of all the characters Mr. Coward has drawn. He is a tragic young man, bitterly disillusioned by life, has taken to drugs, and is broken up over the shallowness, immorality and superficiality of his mother. Florence, his mother, who is reminiscent of Lady

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1. Play Parade, p. 427.

Wishfort in Congreve's The Way of the World, though she typifies the older woman who refuses to accept gracefully the facts of age and ever strives to keep young, is more than just that; she is a sympathetic character. Nicky's tragic quality and Florence's pathetic plight are suggested in the following dialogue:

> Nicky: It isn't that you love him - that would be easier - you never love anyone, you only love them loving you - all your so-called passion and temperament is false - your whole existence has degenerated into an endless empty craving for admiration and flattery - and then you say you've done no harm to anybody. Father used to be a clever man, with a strong will and a capacity for enjoying everything - I can remember him like that - and now he's nothing - a complete nonenity because his spirit's crushed. How could it be otherwise. You've let him down consistently for years - and God knows I'm nothing for him to look forward to - but I might have been if it hadn't been for you -
>
> Florence: Don't talk like that. Don't - don't. It can't be such a crime being loved - it can't be such a crime being happy -
>
> Nicky: You're not happy - you're never happy - you're fighting, fighting all the time to keep your youth and your looks - because you can't bear the thought of living without them - as though they mattered in the end.
>
> Florence: (hysterically) What does anything matter - ever?
>
> Nicky: That's what I'm trying to find out.
>
> Florence: I'm still young inside - I'm still beautiful. Why shouldn't I live my life as I choose?

> Nicky: You're not young or beautiful; I'm seeing for the first time how old you are. It's horrible - your silly fair hair and your face all plastered and painted. (III, 495-496)

But in Fallen Angels we find a small group of characters which, though worldly, are presented in a much less serious vein than those of The Vortex. The two women characters, Jane and Julia, who are the same types, are among Mr. Coward's most delightful characters; they are indicative of the bored wives of the idle rich who, after the first thrills of marriage have worn away, are frustrated and seek adventure elsewhere. They wish to have an amorous affair only to relieve the monotony of life with their golf playing husbands; they do not wish to have their matrimonial boats shipwrecked. The husbands of the play are little more than stock characters whose sole purpose is to round out the cast and to give us a slight glimpse of the men who are responsible for the bored state of their wives. Maurice Duclos, the only other character (besides a maid) of the play, is typical of the sophisticated Frenchman, a ladies' man. Before their marriage, Jane and Julia have each had an affair with him; they now look for him to come to see them and are concerned about which of the two he will be interested in. Their unmoral tendencies are indicated in the following dialogue which also indicates a clearer picture of their types:

Jane: I wonder if he realizes that he's been the one Grand Passion in both of our lives.

Julia: Of course he does, it's almost his profession.

Jane: Our love for our husbands has been on an entirely different plane all along - much nicer and worthier and everything, but not half so soul shattering.

Julia: Two wretchedly happy married women -

Jane: Yes.

Julia: Both during the first two years of their married life having treated their exceedingly nice husbands to the requisite amount of passion and adoration -

Jane: Yes.

Julia: To put it mildly, Dear, we're both ripe for a lapse.

Jane: (laughing) A relapse, Julia, Oh dear! (I, 20-24)

Jane and Julia, though they have the hearts of courtesans, tread lightly in their sophisticated world. They are amusing, and when drunk (in the second act) quite hilarious.

The character types of Hay Fever are the least serious of any which Mr. Coward has drawn, and they are, if not the most intellectual, among the most delightful. Although they are mere puppets dangled for the dramatic purpose of illustrating, in an hilarious manner, the conventional and the unconventional folk in modern society, they are sketched with a lightness and a superficiality that is engaging. But

Mr. Coward himself says that the character interpretation depends upon the skill of the performers:

> It is far and away one of the most difficult plays to perform that I have ever encountered ...Its general effectiveness therefore depends upon expert technique from each and every member of the cast. The level of acting in the original London production, led brilliantly by Miss Marie Tempest, was extremely high, consequently the play was a tremendous success... In America it fared less well. Miss Laura Hope Crews was enthusiastically torn to shreds by the critics for overacting which indeed she did, but with the very extenuating circumstances that her supporting cast was so uniformly dreary that if she hadn't, I gravely doubt if any of the audiences would have stayed in the theatre at all.[1]

However this may be, the character of Judith stands out on the printed page very clearly. She is an exquisite creature who cannot make up her mind whether to go back to her theatrical career or to devote her interests to her family and garden, but it does not seem to matter a great deal. Judith, though the most irresponsible, is the most delightful of the mother types which are found frequently in Mr. Coward's plays. She is in reality very much the same as Florence Lancaster in The Vortex; but we feel sympathy and pity for Florence, we would enjoy knowing Judith. Judith's children, Simon and Sorel, again typify the gay, smart youngsters which we found in the plays of the early phase. They are identically the same types as Gerda and Sholto in The Young Idea.

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1. Play Parade, Intro., p. xi.

Hay Fever affords one of the best examples of Mr. Coward's use of similarities and antitheses of the character types. The Bliss family, Judith, David, Simon and Sorel, who represent a form of unconventionality and cosmopolitanism in their disregard for standard form in their home life are contrasted with the four guests who do not understand or conform to the Bliss' pattern of life; they are conventionally standardized.

Mr. Coward says that he wrote Easy Virtue in reaction to Hay Fever, which had been declared by the critics to be too "tenuous" and "thin."[1] It was indeed a reaction. For while we find in Hay Fever the least serious of any of Mr. Coward's character types and the most delightful, we find in Easy Virtue the most serious types and also the most odious. The Whittaker Family and their friends are typical of a certain phase of English county society, the smug, narrow, hypocritical hide-bound suburbanites. Marion, the daughter, is the most odious of the types drawn. She is large, pasty, virtuous, hypocritical, and interfering. She is in direct antithesis to Larita, who, with her cosmopolitanism and her unmoral attitude toward life, represents the opposite extreme of Marion. Mrs. Whittaker is a sour, meddlesome woman who suffers from many years of sex repression. The son, John, is a weak young man

1. Present Indicative, p. 179.

who cannot decide for himself whether to stand by his wife, Larita, or by his family. Colonel Whittaker is the only character in the whole play whom we could possibly admire or wish to be acquainted with. He is well drawn in his presentation of the person, who, though bound by the conventionalities and narrow customs of his small suburban world, is emancipated in mind and spirit. Mr. Coward has been accused of peopling his plays with the abnormal; but in Easy Virtue he depicts the so-called normal. His abnormal types are on the whole much less odious than the normal ones.

In Sirocco we find the most sensuous of any of Mr. Coward's character sketches; at times they are nauseous and dull. We find again in Lucy the neglected, bored wife which we find in Fallen Angels, but Lucy has no sense of humor and is not amusing to behold like Jane and Julia. The unromantic English husband is again sketched in the character of Stephen, and the home-wrecker in that of Sirio, the Italian. The interest in the play, if any, is centered in the situations rather than the characters.

Another play which contains only barely outlined sketches of character types is Home Chat. Here again the interest is centered in the situation. We find again a group of people representing sophisticated society; they are all more or less alike.

Following, however, Sirocco and Home Chat, in which

the characterization is little more than barely outlined sketches, is This Was a Man which contains more full-bodied and delineated character types than any of Mr. Coward's plays. The character types are alive on the printed page as well as on the stage; one does not have to see them animated in order to visualize them. They have substance, and we see them from the inside. This, we have pointed out, is a thing which is very rare in Mr. Coward's characterization which presents usually only the superficialities, the externals, the surface traits. The satirical portrait of Carol Churt, a thoroughly unscrupulous woman with the temperament of a born courtesan, is brilliantly alive. Edward, her intelligent and sensitive husband, and Evelyn Bathhurst, Edward's best friend, are equally well drawn. Evelyn, sturdy and staunch in his devotion to Edward, and determined to show Carol up to Edward for her own true worth, is caught in his own trap and his masculine superiority becomes putty in Carol's hands. We become thoroughly acquainted with these realistic people. Although This Was a Man has not known the success which some of the other plays have known, the fault does not lie in the characterization, but rather in the fact that the satirical portrait presented is too clear-cut; the mirror does not flatter the society it reflects. People enjoy seeing themselves mirrored on the stage as long as they

see themselves as they think they are, not always as they really are.

Between This Was a Man (1927), the last play of the second phase, and Private Lives (1930), the first of the two comedies of manners of the third, three years elapse. During this time Mr. Coward concerned himself with musicales, the best of which was Bitter Sweet, containing romantic character types, skillfully drawn. But in Private Lives Mr. Coward again returns to the modern sophisticated society for the material for his play. Here we see some changes in the character types depicted, though reflecting the same type of society. They are much less serious, considerably more intellectual, and less sensuous than the types of the second phase. They are the worldly wise young folk of philosophic bent. Amanda and Elyot are brilliant, irreverant, artificial, glittering sophisticates of the ultra smart set. In them Mr. Coward embodies his own personality and that of Gertrude Lawrence, for whom he wrote the play. While sex and amorous intrigue were often the sole concern of the characters in many of the plays of the second phase, it is rather the psychology of sex and marriage that interests Amanda and Elyot. The sexual elements of the play therefore are not sensual but rather intellectual. Amanda and Elyot try to solve their problems by rationalizing about them; they are therefore rather complex character types. But they

do not expect to be able to solve their problems, and they never take themselves too seriously. They are at times logical, at times illogical; they are warm and cold, calm and agitated. Private Lives, perhaps more than Hay Fever, is dependent upon skillful performance for its success. There are (besides the maid) only four people in the cast. Two of these, Victor and Sibyl, the secondary characters, serve only as foils to the leading figures, Amanda and Elyot. In Hay Fever the acting is distributed more evenly among the cast, but Private Lives is, as Mr. Coward says, "a reasonably well constructed duologue for two experienced performers."[1] Too, it is full of laughs and theatricalisms that only the very adroit actor can manage with the necessary accuracy of timing. Mr. Coward admits his lack in the drawing of the secondary characters. He says:

> As a complete play, it leaves a lot to be desired, principally owing to my dastardly and conscienceless behavior towards Sibyl and Victor, the secondary characters. These, poor things, are little better than nine-pins, lightly wooden, and only there at all in order to be repeatedly knocked down and put up again.[2]

But this knocking down and putting up again process is the

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1. Play Parade, Intro., p. xiii.
2. Ibid.

technical method of making effective the characters of Amanda and Elyot. This play illustrates technically Mr. Coward's most skillful use of similarities and antitheses in the character types.

The character types in Design for Living are very much like those in Private Lives, but they are set up in a different pattern which gives them renewed interest and vitality. Otto and Leo, identical types, suggest Elyot in their sophistication, and Ernest is like Victor in his stodginess. In Private Lives we are more concerned with what the characters have to say and do than we are with them as individuals, but in Design for Living we are more concerned with the personalities of the characters. Gilda is a much more clearly drawn and more highly individualized character than Amanda. Her chief attraction for the three men in her life is not that of sex, though sex is not forgotten in the scheme, but is rather the irresistible aura of their personalities. She belonged to them all; she could not decide between them for they were all necessary for her happiness. Gilda shows herself to be a very contradictory combination of forces:

> It humiliates me to the dust to think that I can go so far, clearly and intelligently, keeping faith with my own standards - which are not female standards at all - preserving a certain decent integrity, not using any

> tricks; then suddenly, something happens, a spark is struck, and down I go into the mud! Squirming with archness, being aloof and desirable, consciously alluring, snatching and grabbing, evading and surrendering, dressed and painted for victory. An object of strange contempt. (I, 13)

But Gilda, Otto, and Leo do not take themselves too seriously. Mr. Coward says that he likes to think that "Gilda and Otto and Leo were laughing at themselves."[1] And he says:

> These glib overarticulate, and amoral creatures force their lives into fantastic shapes and problems because they cannot help themselves. Impelled chiefly by the impact of their personalities upon each other, they are like moths in a pool of light, unable to tolerate the lonely outer darkness, and equally unable to share the light without colliding constantly and bruising one another's wings.[2]

Mr. and Mrs. Carver, who represent the average middle class Americans who have money but are utterly lacking in imagination and sophistication, are contrasted against the sophistication of Leo and Otto. In the last act when Leo and Otto talk in a ridiculous manner, the Carvers think them stark, raving mad. They signify, it seems to me, the average audience who cannot comprehend the personalities embodied in Gilda, Otto and Leo.

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1. Ibid., p. xvii.
2. Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

The character types depicted in these two comedies of manners of the third phase are very much like in kind, if not in quality, those of the Restoration dramatists. Like them, they are invested with a lightness of touch and a brilliance in keeping with the Comic Muse. But Mr. Coward at no time creates character types that live on the printed page as do Millamant or Mirabel who are highly individualized in Congreve's The Way of the World; but his dandies and demi-mondaine ladies suggest the beaux and belles of Restoration society in their sophistication and disillusionment.

In conclusion, we have discussed Noel Coward's characterization through the first three phases of his dramatic career. We have observed that he depends upon the actors to give life to his plays and that he has written several plays for certain actors and actresses.

Though his character types have generally little substance on the printed page, they make effective group portraits of the sophisticated, smart set of the Nineteen Twenties. Mr. Coward's use of similarities and antitheses in the character types is the means by which he makes the characters dramatically effective.

We have noted that his character selection changes in line with his life. In the plays of the first phase, when the characters are barely outlined sketches, the predominant types

reflected are the pert, gay youngsters. In the plays of the second phase, the types, on the whole, are more serious. They represent the same sort of society as those of the third phase, but they lack the brilliance and the agility of the types shown in the comedies of the third phase, which represent Mr. Coward's comedy of manners at its best.

PART II CHAPTER II

NOEL COWARD'S FORMULA FOR DIALOGUE

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Noel Coward achieves the comedy of manners chiefly through dialogue which is brilliant and scintillating, barbed and brittle, sophisticated and amusing. The comedy of manners, largely a drama of witty conversation in which the main action and the interest of the play is centered, requires a playwright skilled in the dramatic technique of creating dialogue which effectively and consistently holds the interest of the audience. An analysis of Noel Coward's dialogue reveals the formula. The following points are evident:

(1) The dialogue is witty; the appeal is largely to the intellect.

(2) It gives the illusion of reality; it is often colloquial, chatty, and slangy.

(3) It is often frank and ruthlessly plain-spoken.

(4) There is considerable bickering and quarrelling among the characters.

(5) The majority of the speeches are very clipped and brief.

(6) The tempo is accelerated and of a staccato quality.

(7) There is often a lyric quality, an expression of beauty and melody.

(8) The repartee is measured, controlled and balanced.

(9) The few long speeches are compressed and vigorous.

(10) To maintain suspense and enhance the dramatic quality of the dialogue, there are many sudden reversals in the situations and abrupt changes in the subject matter of the repartee.

Mr. Coward's genius for the comedy of manners is expressed chiefly by the nature and the quality of his wit. He is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde; he suggests Wilde's artistry and style, his flippancy and epigram, but Mr. Coward has added a Twentieth Century rapidity, an accelerated tempo, and his own peculiar flair for catchy, novel effects. Too, while the quality of his wit is suggestive of Wilde's, he lacks the utter aestheticism of Wilde whose motto was "Art for art's sake." Mr. Coward's purpose, on the other hand, is to enlighten as well as to amuse. He wishes to expose, satirically, through the conversation of his characters, the weaknesses of the special coterie of society he so ably depicts. Although Wilde also ridiculed and satirized the beau-monde society to which he belonged, he did so merely for the fun of it; his only purpose in exposing their follies and weaknesses was amusement. Mr. Coward, in his seriousness of

purpose, suggests Shaw rather than Wilde. At times he is more sardonic and bitter than Shaw. Shaw, despite his long, abstract, verbose tirades seldom loses his genial humor. But the speeches of Mr. Coward's characters are never long like those of Shaw; they are on the contrary most of the time exceedingly brief. Technically, Mr. Coward's dialogue does not suggest Shaw, but does suggest Wilde. Like Wilde, he entertains with his brilliant insolence. Like Shaw, he sets in motion the faculties of reflection and intellectual stimulation.

In keeping with his purpose of enlightenment as well as amusement, Mr. Coward attempts to represent the speech of real life. He feels that by imitating the speech of the people about whom he writes, he can expose their superficialities. Mr. Somerset Maugham pays tribute to Mr. Coward's brilliant accuracy in reporting contemporary talk.[1] While Mr. Maugham praises him, Mr. St. John Ervine criticizes him; he says that Mr. Coward's dialogue is at time dull because of its too faithful reproduction of the speech of real life. He says that it is Mr. Coward's business as a dramatist not to reproduce everyday language, but to represent it.[2] There is much, despite the studied colloquialism, to show that his dialogue

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1. Quoted by St. John Ervine in How to Write a Play, New York: Macmillan Company, 1928, p. 71.
2. Ibid., pp. 71-75.

represents rather than reproduces the speech of real life.

In the first place, no group of people could possibly speak as brilliantly, as facetiously or as concisely as Mr. Coward has them speak. While, in the early plays, we find dialogue that is sometimes padded and pointless, on the whole the language of the characters is more often concentrated, condensed and compressed. The shrewd, pungent cleverness of the dialogue affords intellectual stimulation which is seldom occasioned by the speech of real life. Mr. Coward's comedies of manners abound with easy flippancies that arouse laughter. The characters say things that tickle us; there is a devilish, ironic edge to their wit which distinguishes them as Mr. Coward's own creatures. Mr. Coward's characters say things not as we would say them, but as we wish we could. What they have to say is to the point, and they are never at a loss for a clever reply; they have a fluent command of words. What they say contains many brilliant fireworks of wit, light pokings under the ribs for laughter, and a spontaneous exhilaration which is seldom found in the speech of any social group , even the most highly sophisticated and intellectual.

And Mr. Coward's characters often speak with a frankness that is seldom evidenced in life itself. They strip away conventional masks and disrobe themselves of moral inhibitions. Often the audience, unused to such freedom of

speech, is shocked and disquieted by the language of the characters. He throws a clear light upon the frail attitudes and the worthless trends of minds of the society he so audaciously satirizes.

We will now trace through the first three phases of his dramatic career the progressive brilliance in the quality of wit found in his dialogue. We will show how his dialogue reflects the society which he depicts. We will next illustrate the technical characteristics of his formula - his use of the bicker, the short clipped speeches, the element of balance and control, the staccato tempo, the rhythmic and lyric quality, and the concentrated long speeches.

The brilliancy of wit and style which places Mr. Coward among the leading masters of the art of English comedy was not attained immediately, though his early plays show unusual skill in the writing of dialogue. From the plays of the first phase through those of the third when he reaches the heights, there is marked development in the ease, the brilliance, and the wit of the dialogue. We note in the plays of the first phase quite a few strained epigrams, smart lines which are forced and clumsy plays on words. During the early, practice period, Mr. Coward's desire to be witty exceeded his desire to be authentic, The Rat Trap (a serious play of psychological conflict in marriage) contains more strained epigrams than

any other play. The following are examples:

> Sheila: Do you consider our marriage a trifle?
>
> Olive: Marriage nowadays is nothing but a temporary refuge for those who are uncomfortable at home. (I, 10)
>
> ...
>
> Sheila: Oh, please go on, we don't mind a bit; your theory is that love should be free?
>
> Naomi: (enthusiastically) Absolutely - free always.
>
> Keld: (lighting her cigarette) Like the National Gallery. (I, 15)

Mr. Coward's first comedy, I'll Leave It to You, contains such forced lines as the following:

> Daniel: Sleeping sickness!
>
> Mrs. Dermott: What?
>
> Daniel: Yes, it's frightfully prevalent out there.
>
> Mrs. Dermott: Oh, Danny, I hope it's not infectious.
>
> Oliver: Sleeping sickness, by Jove.
>
> Daniel: Yes, I simply daren't go to sleep without an alarm clock. (I, 18)

The play on words found in the manner of the following dialogue hardly seems like Mr. Coward's dialogue:

> Mrs. Crombie: I gather that you have a mine of some sort.
>
> Daniel: Yes - just near the Grand Stand.
>
> Mrs. Crombie: The what?
>
> Daniel: The Grand Slam.
>
> Mrs. Crombie: Slam!
>
> Daniel: It's the name of a mountain, you know. (II, 42)

Although the dialogue of The Young Idea is on the whole more spontaneous than that of the other two plays of the first phase, we find such stilted lines as the following:

> George: Why are you always so prickly? Like a cactus hedge.
>
> Cicely: I see nothing amusing in calling your wife a cactus hedge. Having placed me in an insufferable position, you -
>
> George: If you're alluding to matrimony, dear, it's a trouble many better women have had to face. (II, 932)

We could of course show dialogue from the above plays which is more clever and amusing than that which we have quoted; at best, however, it induces pleasure with little mental stimulation. The dialogue of The Young Idea is more incisive and vituperative than that of the first two plays; it suggests somewhat the pattern for dialogue which Mr. Coward generally follows in his later plays.

The dialogue of the plays of the second phase shows considerable progress in the matter of brilliance and ease over that of the first phase. It also shows qualities which distinguish the plays of the second phase from those of any other. Mr. Coward's desire to be witty at all costs is now overshadowed by the desire to be truthful above all else. In the plays of this phase Mr. Coward is more realistic than at any other time. Sometimes in his attempts to mirror life accurately, the reflection is too clear-cut to afford pleasure; it is too disturbing to be delightful. His greatest period of disillusionment and bitterness is apparent at this time. Yet there is wit, but it is more ponderous, more caustic and more lashing than at any other time. He presents, with sardonic satire, a group of people who do not know where they are heading; they meet and discuss whatever stimulations or repressions they feel; they pull vigorously against the conventions of life; they infer that life is futile and therefore each moment should be lived for what it alone has to offer.

Mr. Coward's natural gift for witty dialogue comes to early fruition in The Vortex, the first play of the second phase. It shows a marked advance over the plays of the first phase in ease and naturalness. In this play which reflects the modern post-war disregard of life as a serious matter, for the more easy facing of life as a delusion, Mr. Coward's wit

is both serious and amusing. He alternates the speech which brings a sophisticated laugh with that which stirs to serious thought; in this manner he keeps a touch of lightness to his seriousness. The Vortex sets the pace and timbre which characterizes Mr. Coward's dialogue; in any of the plays to follow which do not come up to the quality of the dialogue of The Vortex, we are disappointed. Almost any dialogue picked at random from this play would illustrate improvement over that of the earlier plays. Let us note the easy, snappy, smartness of the following lines:

> Helen: I'm very fond of Florence.
>
> Pawnie: We all are. Oh, my God, look at that lampshade.
>
> Helen: I gave it to her last Christmas.
>
> Pawnie: Wasn't that a little naughty of you?
>
> Helen: I don't see why; it's extremely pretty.
>
> Pawnie: Too unrestrained. Such a bad example for the servants. (I, 428)

The following dialogue illustrates Mr. Coward's genius for reflecting the emptiness of life for the social set he depicts; there is a trend of seriousness to the dialogue.

> Florence: What does she do?
>
> Nicky: Nothing much - she writes things occasionally.

Florence: Where did you meet her?

Nicky: First of all at a party at Olive Lloyd Kennedy's.

Florence: I can't bear Olive Lloyd Kennedy - she's a cat. (I, 447)

And again:

Pawnie: Let's stop the music for a moment and think of something really marvelous to do.

Bunty: No, let's go on dancing.

Clara: I'm exhausted.

Pawnie: What was that divine game we played coming back from Paris, Helen?

Helen: Just ordinary "Clumps," wasn't it?

Bunty: I loathe "Clumps." (II, 460)

The Vortex furnishes the best example of the mixture of wit and seriousness. The other plays of the second phase are more serious than amusing (with the exception of Hay Fever and Fallen Angels, which contain only slight glimpses of gravity). Easy Virtue, which is a very vitriolic satire upon hypocrisy and conventionality, contains dialogue which, though of a more ponderous nature, is witty. We find such lines as the following:

Marion: You mustn't jeer at religion, old girl.

> Larita: I don't jeer at religion - but I jeer at hypocrisy. (II, 181)

And again:

> Mrs. Whittaker: The truth is, Jim, that Rose Jenkins by her immoral behavior, has caused unpleasantness in the village, and therefore must suffer accordingly.
>
> Colonel: It's her own village - she was born here. (I, 6)

Although the dialogue of both The Vortex and Easy Virtue reveals the shallowness, the inadequacies, and futilities of the social groups represented, it is more sophisticated, ironic and polished than the speech of real life. But we find during the second phase several plays in which the dialogue is more closely akin to the speech of real life, and is therefore at times somewhat dull and inconsequential, yet natural. In this group are Home Chat, Sirocco, and This Was a Man. When criticized, Mr. Coward defends the dialogue of these plays on the grounds of its faithfulness to the facts of life,[1] but Mr. Coward is at his best when he gives way to his natural ability for witty conversation. Let us look at a few lines of dialogue from This Was a Man which shows the monotonous and halting qualities of the speech of

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1. Mr. St. John Ervine quotes him to this effect in "Plays of Mr. Noel Coward," Royal Society of Literature, p. 85.

everyday life:

Edward: What's wrong?

Evelyn: There's nothing wrong.

Edward: You'd better tell me, you know.

Evelyn: I want to tell you.

Edward: Come on then.

Evelyn: I've got to tell you.

Edward: Out with it.

Evelyn: But I can't. (III, 226)

Although these plays contain more dialogue in the pattern of real life than any other of Mr. Coward's plays, they do not lack wit and humor. They are of a more serious ring; the dialogue is seldom airy and light, but the satire, though caustic, arouses a cynical smile.

Hay Fever, the lightest and airiest of all of Mr. Coward's plays, contains dialogue which is amusing, brilliant and gay. It is pervaded with a steady stream of wit and nonsense, though the satire is again directed against the aimlessness of the life of the beau-monde. But here the satire is not sardonic or caustic; it is so closely allied with nonsense that it seems farcical. The sprightliness of the dialogue is indicated in the following lines:

Judith: I don't flaunt about - I never have. I've been morally an extremely nice woman all my life - more or less - and if dabbling gives me pleasure, I don't see why I shouldn't dabble.

Sorel: But it oughtn't to give you pleasure any more.

Judith: You know, Sorel, you grow more damnably feminine every day. I wish I'd brought you up differently.

Sorel: I'm proud of being feminine.

Judith: You're a darling, and I adore you; and you're very pretty, and I'm madly jealous of you.

Sorel: Are you really? How lovely.

Judith: You will be nice to Sandy, won't you?

Sorel: Can't he sleep in "Little Hell?"

Judith: My dear, he's frightfully athletic, and all those hot water pipes will sap his vitality.

Sorel: They'll sap Richard's vitality too.

Judith: He won't notice them; he's probably used to scorching tropical embassies with punkahs waving and everything. (I, 509)

The dialogue of Fallen Angels is also snappy and sophisticated. Like Hay Fever, it is of a light, airy quality, but it is more impudent and biting than Hay Fever. While it is not as philosophic or as wise as Mr. Coward's comedies of manners of the third phase, it suggests the pattern of his dialogue which is used in the third phase. The satire of the play is flippant and indulgent; it is not sardonic like that of This Was a Man,

Easy Virtue or The Vortex.

Private Lives and Design for Living, the comedies of manners of the third phase, continue in the spirit of Hay Fever and Fallen Angels but exceed them in the quality of the wit. The characters, not restrained by moral codes, flippantly mock social conventions and institutions. The dialogue of these plays is facile, polished, profound, bold, disrespectful and full of rare truisms. Its polish and brilliancy suggest Congreve perhaps more than that of any other play in all of modern English drama. In these plays, Mr. Coward's dialogue attains a quality of sustained excellence throughout the entire plays; it is suave and exuberant. Private Lives and Design for Living epitomize in their dialogue the sophistication of modern post-war England. Mr. Coward himself seems fond of the characters he places in these plays; but in the more serious plays of the second phase, he does not seem very fond of his characters with their frail attitudes and aimlessness. The satire of these plays, though directed against the same social groups, is not sardonic; it is stinging, but always light.

Private Lives, the wisest and wittiest of all of Mr. Coward's plays, is also his masterpiece in the art of brilliant dialogue. Such lines as the following, somewhat philosophic, are also amusing:

Elyot: What about after we're dead?

Amanda: I think a rather gloomy merging into everything, don't you?

Elyot: I hope not, I'm a bad merger.

Amanda: You won't know a thing about it.

Elyot: I hope for a glorious oblivion, like being under gas.

Amanda: I always dream the most peculiar things under gas.

Elyot: Would you be young always? If you could choose?

Amanda: No, I don't think so, not if it meant having awful bull's glands popped into me.

Elyot: Cows for you dear. Bulls for me.

Amanda: We certainly live in a marvelous age. (II, 226)

Design for Living, though not quite as witty as Private Lives, contains dialogue which is equally as gay, as vigorous and as sparkling. The pleasure which it gives lies in the spontaneous fun, a bubbling up of the spirit, the incessant movement, and the nimble cross fire of gay invective. The brevity of the speeches, the quick tempo, the humor, and a certain lyric quality are all indicated by the following dialogue:

Gilda: You and Otto had a row afterwards, didn't you?

Leo: Yes, a beauty.

Gilda: Blows?

Leo: Ineffectual blows. Otto fell into the bath!

Gilda: Was there any water in it?

Leo: Not at first.

Gilda: (beginning to laugh) Leo, you didn't -

Leo: (also beginning to laugh) Of course I did; it was the obvious thing to do.

Gilda: Couldn't he get out?

Leo: Every time he tried, I pushed him back.

Gilda: (now laughing helplessly) Oh, the poor darling!

Leo: (giving way) Finally - he - got wedged -

Gilda: This is hysteria. Stop it, stop it.

Leo: It was a very narrow bath, far - far - too narrow. (I, i, 23)

We have pointed out briefly the nature and the quality of the wit found in the comedies of manners of the first three phases of Mr. Coward's dramatic career. Now let us consider his technical formula for the dialogue which is of a mechanistic design. First of all, we will discuss the element of bickering which Mr. Coward employs as a device of stage craft. His characters bicker and quarrel consistently and frequently. His method is ingenious and unique; he uses the bicker for the technical purpose of sustaining dramatic suspense. He starts

a group of characters upon a discussion which leads almost to argument or quarrel - the audience is anticipant to see the well dressed ladies and gentlemen who have previously spoken wittily and charmingly to each other, forget their manners and speak in a language less controlled, more emotional, passionate and angry. But Mr. Coward instead directs the course of the repartee into another channel of comic vein. After many situations in which the characters almost fight but never do, he finally presents a big scene in which the temper tantrums, so long anticipated, are given expression in an amusing and laugh-provoking manner. Mr. Coward's use of the bicker is delightful, but it is controlled and artificial in its execution. Fallen Angels and Private Lives furnish the best examples of his use of the bicker as a dramatic device, but in all of Mr. Coward's plays the characters at some time or other quarrel and bicker.

In the second act of Fallen Angels Mr. Coward presents a very realistic picture of two society women in a state of intoxication. As they become increasingly intoxicated, they bicker and finally quarrel. At the beginning of the act, when they are sober, they are very friendly; as they begin to drink they begin to bicker; at the close of the act, when they are quite intoxicated, they have a nasty row. One is conscious throughout the act of an ever increasing build-up

for the final scene. Abrupt changes in the repartee, brought about by slight shifts in the situations, furnish the element of suspense. Just when the two women are at the point of heated battle, Mr. Coward toys with his audience by interrupting with the ringing of the doorbell, the telephone, or some other dramatic device. Then he starts them all over again, mixing up their ideas and staggering about. Let us note the increasing tension of their bickering by two examples of dialogue; the first is moderate compared to the second:

> Jane: You make me feel like a French Revolution virago. I'd like to rush up and down Bond Street with your head on a pole.
>
> Julia: You'd better pull yourself together and I'll ask Saunders to help you to your flat.
>
> Jane: If she comes near me I'll throttle her.
>
> Julia: I've never seen you violent before. It's very interesting psychologically.
>
> Jane: I could bring you down to earth in one moment if I liked. (II, 56)

They present in this second bit of dialogue a rather incongruous picture with their elaborate clothes and their formal dinner appointments when they say:

> Julia: (losing all control) How dare you! How dare you! I'll never speak to you again as long as I live. You're utterly, completely contemptible.

> If it's true, you're nothing but a sniveling hypocrite. And if it's false you're a bare faced liar. There's not much to choose between you. Please go at once.
>
> Jane: Go - I'm only too delighted. You must curb your social sense, Julia, if it leads you to drunken orgies and abuse.
>
> Julia: (in tears) Go - go away -
>
> Jane: Certainly I shall and it may interest you to know that I'm going straight to Maurice.
>
> Julia: (wailing) Liar - Liar.
>
> Jane: I'm not lying - it's true. And I shall go away with him at once and you and Fred and Willy can go to hell, the whole lot of you. (II, 58)

During the whole of Act II of Private Lives nothing happens from beginning to end except bickering, love-making, more bickering, wrangling, resolutions that there shall be no more and then some more. There is a gradual and brilliant build up to the grand finale in which the main action of the play occurs - a free for all tumble on the floor in which objects are broken and Amanda and Elyot roll about in unconventional and undignified poses during a fierce but comic temper tantrum.

Amanda and Elyot who are now in Amanda's flat in Paris, having run away from their legal mates on the eve of their honeymoons, have agreed that whenever they are tempted to fight they will say "Sollocks" to save the situation. They

are often called upon to say it. The bickering of the following dialogue which comes early in the act is of a mild quality:

> Amanda: Don't be cross, Elyot, I haven't been so dreadfully loose actually. Five years is a long time, and even if I did nip off with someone every now and again, they were none of them very serious.
>
> Elyot: Oh, do stop it please -
>
> Amanda: Well, what about you?
>
> Elyot: Do you want me to tell you?
>
> Amanda : No, no, I don't - I take everything back - I don't.
>
> Elyot: I was madly in love with a woman in South Africa.
>
> Amanda: Did she have a ring through her nose?
>
> Elyot: Don't be revolting. (II, 221-222)

Then there follows a scene in which they get along beautifully and are very complimentary and kind to each other. But not for long, for they start to discuss their new mates whom they have left behind at the hotel where they had been honeymooning:

> Amanda: Victor really had a great charm.
>
> Elyot: You must tell me all about it.
>
> Amanda: He had a positive mania for looking after me, and protecting me.

Elyot: That would have died down in time, dear.

Amanda: You mustn't be rude; there's no necessity to be rude.

Elyot: I wasn't in the least rude, I merely made a perfectly rational statement.

Amanda: Your voice was decidedly bitter.

Elyot: Victor had glorious legs, hadn't he? And fascinating ears.

Amanda: Don't be silly.

Elyot: He probably looked radiant in the morning, all flushed and tumbled on the pillow.

Amanda: I never saw him on a pillow.

Elyot: I'm surprised to hear it.

Amanda: (angrily) Elyot!

Elyot: There's no need to be cross.

Amanda: What did you mean by that?

Elyot: I'm sick of listening to you yap, yap, yap, yap, yapping about Victor.

Amanda: No listen, Elyot, once and for all -

Elyot: Oh my dear, Sollocks! Sollocks! ...(II,224-225)

Following this scene in which they almost really quarrel, they cuddle together on the sofa and are very loving, but soon again they are engaged in a rapier-thrust word play:

Elyot: It's a pity you didn't have more brandy; it might have made you a little less disagreeable.

Amanda: It doesn't seem to have worked such wonders with you.

Elyot: Snap, snap, snap; like a little adder.

Amanda: Adders don't snap, they sting.

Elyot: Nonsense, they have a little bag of venom behind their fangs and they snap.

Amanda: They sting.

Elyot: They snap. (II, 235-236)

There are several more such scenes growing in intensity, but always brisk and witty. Finally there is the grand battle in which Elyot tells Amanda that she is "an evil minded little vampire,"[1] and that he hopes to God that he will never set eyes on her again. Amanda, held on the floor by Elyot who has grabbed her leg when she attempted to get up, screams, "Beast; brute; swine; cad; beast; beast; brute; devil."[2] And into the greatly disordered room in which many objects have been broken and hurled about, come Sibyl and Victor to see Amanda and Elyot rolling about on the floor.

But, in spite of such outbursts, Mr. Coward employs balance and measure in his formula for dialogue. Also the speeches are almost always short (seldom more than three lines) and the tempo is of a staccato quality. One is reminded of an expert game of table tennis in which the ping-pong ball is skillfully and lightly bounced back and forth with accuracy.

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1. II, 230.
2. Ibid.

The conversations which we find in life do not have the staccato give and take which we find in Mr. Coward's plays. Too, there is often a melodious quality and a beauty of form. The few long speeches are also carefully controlled; they are concise, clear, vigorous, profound and polished. They contain many of his brilliant reflections and satirical shafts.

The following examples of dialogue show not only how Mr. Coward controls, balances and measures the repartee, but also shows the short speeches, the staccato give and take, the accelerated tempo and a musical quality: From Fallen Angels:

> Fred: We've been married five years.
>
> Julia: A divine five years.
>
> Fred: Yes - wonderful.
>
> Julia: We're not in love a bit now, you know.
>
> Fred: I don't know anything of the sort.
>
> Julia: It's true.
>
> Fred: The first violent passion is naturally over -
>
> Julia: Thank God. (I, 12)

From Private Lives:

> Amanda : What have you been doing lately? During these last years.

Elyot: Travelling about. I went around the world, you know, after -

Amanda: (hurriedly) Yes, yes, I know. How was it?

Elyot: The world?

Amanda: Yes.

Elyot: Oh, highly enjoyable.

Amanda: China must be very interesting.

Elyot: Very big, China.

Amanda: And Japan -

Elyot: Very small. (I, 212)

From The Vortex:

Tom: That's a lovely dress.

Florence: It is sweet, isn't it.

Tom: You always wear wonderful clothes.

Florence: Do I, Tom?

Tom: You know you do.

Florence: Do you remember the first time we met?

Tom: Rather.

Florence: Oxford's so full of romance, isn't it?

Tom: It was when you came down. (II, 462-463)

From Hay Fever:

Jackie: I've always wanted to go to Italy.

> Richard: Rome is a beautiful city.
>
> Jackie: Yes, I've always heard Rome was lovely.
>
> Richard: And Naples and Capri - Capri's enchanting. (I, 527)

The lyric quality, though more apparent in the musicales and the romantic plays, sometimes is very lovely in the comedies of manners. Elyot in Private Lives says:

> I saw such beautiful things, darling. Moonlight shining on old temples, strange barbaric dances in jungle villages, scarlet flamingoes flying over deep, deep blue water. Breathlessly lovely and completely unexciting because you weren't there to see them with me. (II, 227-228)

An example of Mr. Coward's use of the condensed, long speech in which much of his social criticism is expressed is the following speech from Design for Living:

> Gilda: The human race is a let down, Ernest; a bad, bad let down! I'm disgusted with it. It thinks it's progressed but it hasn't; it thinks it's risen above the primeval slime but it hasn't - it's still wallowing in it! It's still clinging to us, clinging to our hair and our eyes and our souls. We've invented a few small things that make noises, but we haven't invented one big thing that creates quiet, endless quiet - something to pull over us like a gigantic eiderdown; something to deaden the sound of our emotional yellings and screechings and suffocate our psychological confusions. (II, iii, 63)

Mr. Coward's method of maintaining suspense which is used in the bickering scenes is characteristic of the dialogue throughout the plays. To maintain suspense and enhance the dramatic quality of the dialogue, he uses many sudden reversals in situation or he changes the subject matter of the repartee. Sometimes when the direct matter begins to press too insistently he lightens the touch in these ways. For instance, in Design for Living, Ernest and Gilda get very serious in the following dialogue. Our thoughts shade a little toward the sinister; but just as they do, Otto, who is gay and carefree, enters the scene, and the situation and the subject matter are completely changed:

> Gilda: (hysterically) Stay a little longer, you'll find out so much.
>
> Gilda: Courage, Ernest, be brave. Look at the whole thing as a side show. People pay to see freaks. Walk up! Walk up and see the Fat Lady and the Monkey Man and the Living Skeleton and the three Hermaphrodites. (I, 14)

The following dialogue from Private Lives illustrates an adroit change in the subject matter without a change in the situation. Amanda and Elyot are, for a moment, very seriously philosophic, but soon they are flippant again:

> Amanda: What happens if one of us dies. Does the one that's left still laugh?

Elyot: Yes, yes, with all his might.

Amanda: (wistfully clutching his hand) That's serious enough, isn't it?

Elyot: No, no, it isn't. Death's very laughable, such a cunning little mystery. All done with mirrors.

Amanda: Darling, I believe you're talking nonsense.

Elyot: So is everyone else in the long run. Let's be superficial and pity the poor philosophers. Let's blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic school children. Let's savour the delight of the moment. Come and kiss me, darling, before your body rots and worms pop in and out of your eye sockets.

Amanda: Elyot, worms don't pop. (II, 232)

The dialogue which we have quoted in this chapter may illustrate, in some measure, the characteristics of Mr. Coward's dialogue; but it cannot give an adequate estimate of his gift for easy and brilliant dialogue. One must read a play in its entirety to realize fully his genius for creating dialogue which is of the moment and which reflects clearly the post-war sophisticated society.

In conclusion, we have pointed out the nature and the quality of Mr. Coward's wit as shown in his dialogue of the comedies of manners during the first three phases of his dramatic career. We have noted the amateurish quality and the strained epigrammatic wit in the plays of the first phase.

We have observed a marked improvement in the naturalness and the brilliance in the dialogue of the plays of the second phase. We have seen that several of the plays contain dialogue which is sometimes dull because it is too near the speech of real life. We have observed that Mr. Coward's cynicism and disillusionment find their most virulent expression in the dialogue of the plays of the second phase. We have indicated that Mr. Coward's most brilliant and witty dialogue occurs in the comedies of manners of the third phase. We have pointed out the mechanistic design of his formula for dialogue which includes balance and measure in the repartee, short, clipped speeches, accelerated tempo, bickering and quarrelling, and dramatic devices for maintaining suspense.

PART II CHAPTER III

NOEL COWARD'S STRUCTURAL PATTERN

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The structural pattern which Noel Coward employs in his comedies of manners is carefully planned, controlled and balanced. It is like a geometric design in its accuracy, exactness and measure. But Mr. Coward, with his innate instinct for the theatre, manages this mechanistic design with such apparent ease that we are not at all consciously aware of the adroit plan behind the play; he understands thoroughly the art of blending the various elements of his dramatic formula.

Like Scribe and Sardou, the early French exponents of the "well-made" play,[1] he places a great deal of emphasis upon technique. He is somewhat reminiscent of them in his use of carefully manipulated situations, artificiality, coincidence, intrigue, theatricalisms and stage tricks. But Scribe's

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1. Mr. Thomas H. Dickinson says that it was upon the foundations of the "well-made" play, as exemplified by Scribe, that the super structure of modern commercialism in the theatre was built. Outline of Contemporary Drama, Boston, New York: Mifflin Co., 1927, p. 30.

Mr. Montrose J. Moses infers that the "well-made" play is one which is written under standardized specifications dictated by the "theatre trust," with the box office receipts as the sole goal of the playwright. The American Dramatist, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1925, p. 352.

To say of a play now that it is "well-made" is not complimentary; the term has come to denote a play written purely for commercial appeal and lacking in artistic qualities. Scribe, however, at the particular time that his type of play appeared, performed an important service in emphasiz ing dramatic construction and eliminating sentimentality.

and Sardou's purpose was solely to amuse, never to enlighten. Mr. Coward wishes to instruct and to ridicule as well as to amuse.[1]

We have, heretofore, mentioned the fact that Pinero and Jones, influenced by Scribe and Sardou, used the structural pattern of the "well-made" play in their comedies of manners. Mr. Coward's structural plan more nearly approximates that of Pinero and Jones than that of Scribe and Sardou. Like them he possesses the knack of graceful and easy flow of plot development and dialogue; the playgoer has hardly a suspicion of the deft artfulness concealed behind the facile mechanism. Scribe's play, Bataille de Dames, which affords an excellent example of the "well-made" play as conceived by the French playwright, is a highly artificial and mechanical play, filled with many fictitious ravellings of plot and counter-plots. It suggests none of the pattern of real life, and the machinery of the structure is not concealed; in fact it rather glaringly obtrudes. The mechanics of Mr. Coward's

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1. Mr. Coward's romantic comedy, The Marquise, approximates structurally the "well-made" play much more than his comedies of manners. It is full of highly improbable situations, stage tricks and theatricalisms, and it is filled with many fictitious ravellings and unravellings of plot and counter-plot. The purpose of the play seems only to amuse; it contains no satiric theme. However, it is unfair in the light of the modern interpretation of the term, "well-made" to classify the play in this manner. Mr. Coward's brilliancy of wit and dialogue and the excellent drawing of the character types, Eloise, Raoul and Esteban, which are among his best portrayals, give to the play the stamp of artistry.

plays, like those of Pinero and Jones, are never obtrusive; but are cleverly and adroitly concealed in an apparent ease of execution. The pattern of real life is at least approximated in a heightened form.

Despite any influences, Mr. Coward's technique is unmistakably his own. With an inimitable touch and the genius of a skilled satiric dramatist, he employs, in a manner peculiar to himself and with an even, consistent mastery, a variety of elements in his structural plan. Among the elements of structure which he uses in his formula for the comedy of manners, we find:

First, the use of organic plot development, which is ingeniously manipulated.

Second, the use of parallelisms and sudden reversals in the situations.

Third, emphasis upon situations which are often based upon coincidence and surprise.

Fourth, a balanced use of similarities and antitheses in the character types.

Fifth, the use of bickering and quarrelling among the characters, which is controlled and regulated.

The action of the play is centered in these elements of structure; it depends in a large measure upon the brisk, staccato scenes, the sudden reversals of situations, the

dialogue, and the bickering and quarrelling among the characters. The movement and action are also found in the ideas, which, presented in a satiric, comic vein, provoke thoughtful laughter. All these elements are closely interwoven in the structural pattern.

Mr. Coward's structural pattern for the comedy of manners does not differ in the plays of one phase from those of another, but there is evident a marked progress in the development of his formula. In the early comedies of the first phase, we find the elements of structure which we find later in Private Lives and Design for Living, where Mr. Coward's structural pattern is at its best; but we do not find in these early plays the perfect and harmonious fusion of the elements which we find in these comedies of the third phase. Also the measure, the balance, and the accuracy are in an embryonic stage of development. In the comedies of manners of the second phase, the mechanistic design becomes increasingly apparent. Fallen Angels and Hay Fever more closely approximate the pattern of Private Lives and Design for Living than do the other plays.[1] These four plays constitute Mr. Coward's best examples of the comedy of manners, and illustrate the best expression of his structural design. We will, at this

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1. This Was a Man is also an excellent example of Mr. Coward's structural plan, but, as a comedy of manners, it falls short in that the satire is too sardonic.

point, explain the nature of his structural formula and then make specific application to these four plays.

First, let us emphasize the nature of the plot development and the treatment of the act divisions; particularly we will note Mr. Coward's methods for maintaining suspense. We will discuss his technical method in the use of parallelisms and reversals, for the action of the play is sometimes dependent upon this method. We will indicate his methods of movement and action in the use of ideas, which he juggles precariously.

The development and management of the plot, which is organic[1] (in that the structural elements are exposition, involution, climax, and resolution), is of much greater importance to Mr. Coward than the plot itself. The plot, which is usually very tenuous and light, is merely a vehicle for the theme; the telling of the story is of secondary importance to the manner in which the story is told, and the purpose for which the story has been employed. It is used merely as a pattern for weaving the various elements of his formula and for maintaining the suspense and the interest of the audience.

Mr. Coward's comedies of manners are divided into three acts. The first act, which contains the exposition, is

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1. See Walley and Wilson, The Anatomy of Literature, Murray Hill, N. Y.: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934, pp. 89, 127.

brilliantly constructed. Therein, with mathematical precision, he skillfully conveys to the audience sufficient, concentrated information for an adequate understanding of what is to follow. The setting, which is a part of the exposition in that it suggests the comedy of manners, is always the drawing room, the studio, the dining room, the hotel lobby or terrace; the appointments of the setting are nearly always luxurious and suggest sophistication. The accelerated tempo of the play is immediately indicated by the celerity and smartness of the dialogue and the sophistication of the character types. The character presentation is adroit, clear and concise; we know immediately the type of characters who will people the play; we soon know who are the more significant characters, and by the close of the act we have been thoroughly informed of the dramatic purpose of the characters.

The element of suspense is maintained chiefly by a series of minor crises, each of greater magnitude than the previous one, leading up to a carefully planned and climactic curtain.[1] The exposition runs along at a pretty even pace for a while before these crises begin to occur; they are filled with unexpected twists and surprises which delight and tantalize the audience. At the same time, they skillfully convey

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1. *This Was a Man*, *The Marquise*, *The Queen Was in the Parlor*, *I'll Leave It to You*, *Sirocco*, and *The Young Idea*, afford excellent examples of Mr. Coward's treatment of minor crises in the first act as well as the plays we shall presently analyze in the text.

information which advances the exposition.

At the close of the first act, the playgoer has an accurate understanding of the type of play he is witnessing; he is familiar with the character types and is keenly stimulated to see what the next two acts will convey in regard to them. He has been delightfully entertained; at the same time he has received some insight to the thematic material of the play and has been provoked, in a measure, to thoughtful laughter. If he is critical and observant, he sees that the plan of the act is definite, balanced, symmetrical, and that the various elements are related in a cumulative manner.

The second act, now that the unfolding of the story and a comprehensible presentation of the dramatic materials have been successfully handled in the exposition of the first act, proceeds at a rapid pace. The progress may be diagrammed to show a much more rapid ascent than that of the first act; the minor crises occur more frequently and with increasing tension to the final major climax, which occurs generally at the close of the act.[1]

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1. This Was a Man, Easy Virtue, Sirocco, The Queen Was in the Parlor, Bitter Sweet, and The Young Idea furnish examples of major climaxes at the close of the second act.

The major climax of This Was a Man occurs when Carol returns and goes into Evie's bedroom.

The major climax of Easy Virtue occurs when Larita throws a book at the statue of the Venus de Milo.

The major climax of Sirocco occurs when Lucy declares that she will go down to the "very dregs" with Sirio.

The major climax of The Queen Was in the Parlor occurs when Nadya promises Sabien she will be his lover only once and agrees that he will die to-morrow.

The major climax of Bitter Sweet occurs when Carl is killed in a duel.

Cicely's going off with Roddy is the major climax of The Young Idea.

But the nature of the crises found in the second act is often different from that of the first act, which depended upon abrupt changes in the situation or increases of the exposition. The crises of the second act are centered in the movement and the conflict of ideas expressed in the dialogue, and the bickering among the characters which increases rapidly to the tempo of battle. The theme of the plays is more fully expressed in the second act, and the use of wit and brilliance are more lavishly employed than in the first act. The material action is greatly subordinated to the intellectual action; the action is more in the faculties of reflection, comparison and deduction. This action is very keen and quick, and the climax usually contains the element of surprise.[1] The suspense of interest in this intellectual action is keyed to such a pitch that the audience holds its breath in anticipation. The second acts of Mr. Coward's best comedies of manners are his masterpieces of dramatic creation; they are magnificent festivals of rollicking, sparkling fun of an intellectual nature. They indicate that Mr. Coward is not

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1. The second act of This Was a Man is illustrative of Mr. Coward's formula. The two characters do little more throughout the act than to eat, drink and dance, but the action, which is centered in the movement of the dialogue is keen; they quarrel and bicker; the surprise ending, when Carol slips noiselessly into Evelyn's bedroom, is an exciting climax.

only a master showman and a superb artist, but also a keen satirist.

Mr. Coward's third acts of his comedies of manners are disappointing. At times it seems they are there only for the purpose of satisfying the conventional demands of the theatre; the plays might well have ended with the second act. The third acts are often padded and trail off into inconsequential discussion which lacks the brilliance and wit of the second act. They are weak largely because Mr. Coward does not offer a solution for the problems he has presented in the first two acts. He feels that the problems of life are not neatly sewed up and settled by happy denouements; therefore, he presents none. However, this circular structure is often disappointing to the playgoer who has been keyed to a high pitch of suspense and curiosity for the outcome. He finds himself right back where he started at the opening of the play.

Although, as Mr. Coward says, the press notices for Fallen Angels were "vituperative to the point of incoherence,"[1] the play is an excellent, early example of his structural formula for the comedy of manners. The exposition presented in the first act is clear, concise and adroitly managed. The play opens with a breakfast scene in the dining room of Fred and Julia Sterroll's flat. Almost immediately we are informed by

1. Present Indicative, p. 210.

the nature of the dialogue that the characters are sophisticated, modern, young married folks who are rather bored with life and marriage. Shortly, Mr. and Mrs. Willy Banbury are introduced, Fred and Willy go off to play golf, and Jane and Julia are left alone to amuse themselves as best they may. A rapid rise in the dramatic movement is indicated by Jane's saying that Maurice is coming from France to visit them. It seems that each of the young ladies has had an affair with Maurice some time previous to their marriages. They want very much to see Maurice, but are somewhat afraid and plan to go off to avoid seeing him. They get their bags and are about to depart when the door bell rings; at this point the curtain falls. This carefully planned curtain creates anticipation for Maurice's appearance upon the scene.[1]

But the audience is surprised when the ringing of the door bell did not announce the arrival of Maurice. At the opening of the second act, the evening of the same day, we find the two women dressed elaborately and waiting dinner - as well as the arrival of Maurice. They are keyed to a high note of

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1. Mr. Coward often employs theatrical devices at the close of the first act to increase the suspense of the audience. In This Was a Man, Carol phones Harry, her ardent lover in the opening scene of the play, and tells him that she is ill and will be unable to go to dinner with him. When she phones him, she is all dressed and ready to leave to go to dinner with Evie.

In The Marquise, Eloise, who had first appeared unannounced at the window, rings the bell as if she had not been there before and asks hospitality for the night. Raoul refuses her, but Adrienne appears and insists that she remain.

In Home Chat, Janet flings a poker across the room and announces to her husband that she is leaving him.

In Bitter Sweet, Sarah and Carl elope.

anticipation. The suspense is increased by such details as the arrival of a taxi, and the frequent ringing of the phone and doorbell. Once Saunders, the maid, announces a foreign looking gentleman, but it happens not to be Maurice, merely a stranger at the wrong address. When Maurice finally rings, they have ceased to answer the phone and are almost too intoxicated to care. The movement of the act is in the increasing intoxication of the two women;[1] they bicker and quarrel until they finally have a nasty row at the close of the act when Jane goes off angrily, declaring that she had known all along where Maurice is and that she is going to him. Mr. Coward again toys with his audience who cannot be sure whether or not Jane knows where Maurice is.

The third act of the play gives the feeling of the "morning after the night before," which, though in keeping with the nature of the play, is somewhat of a letdown contrasted against the high emotional tension of the second act. At the opening of the act, Jane has not as yet been heard from since her departure the night previous, and Willy and Julia bicker over the news that Jane has gone off with the Frenchman. As they go off in search of Jane, the long anticipated arrival of Maurice is announced by phone. Jane returns, and upon seeing on the note pad that Maurice has phoned and upon being

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1. See pp. 94-97.

told that Julia has gone off with a gentleman, she immediately concludes that Julia and Maurice are together. In turn she tells Fred that Julia has gone off with the Frenchman; thus we note one of Mr. Coward's use of parallelisms. By such parallel and farcical knots the suspense of the audience is skillfully maintained. Finally Maurice arrives upon the scene just when the two couples are engaged in heated discussion. This is indeed the high moment of the third act and presents a surprising anti-climax.[1] Maurice immediately takes control of the situation and to the mystification of all concerned, handles it very deftly; he tells the husbands that it was all a put up job merely to arouse them to a sense of their responsibilities toward their wives. At the same time he announces that he has rented the flat above and insists, at the very close of the act, that Jane and Julia come up to help him select the curtains.

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1. The Young Idea, I'll Leave It to You, This Was a Man, and The Marquise contain surprising anti-climaxes also which illustrate Mr. Coward's technique.

A surprising anti-climax occurs in The Young Idea when after Hiram and Jennifer have become engaged, Gerda and Sholto return and tell their mother that Cicely and their father are happy, and then tell Hiram that their mother and father are not divorced and that their father is insane.

It is a surprise in I'll Leave It to You when Uncle Daniel, who has said that he really has no money after all, receives a wire from his agent saying that a big vein in a mine has been struck. Sylvia, who asks him if he sent the wire to himself, is told "yes."

In This Was a Man, after Edward departs, Carol very sweetly says to Evie who had threatened suicide, "There's still time to shoot yourself."

A surprising anti-climax occurs in The Marquise when Eloise announces that she really loves Raoul.

The husbands stare and remain mystified. The third act of this play is better than many of the third acts of other plays by Mr. Coward.[1] The suspense contained in the act is much keener than that usually found in a third act; there is no padding, and the unravelling of the knots is ingenious.

There is little or no plot to Hay Fever. The interest of the play depends upon the skillful treatment of the extravagant situation, rather than the story element. It is a delightful portrayal of a "slapdash," Bohemian, bad mannered, unconventional family of four who invite guests for the week-end without the knowledge or approval of the others. The four family members versus the four guests afford many opportunities for the dramatist to display his genius with the handling of parallelisms, which are much in evidence in this play.

The action of the play takes place in the hall of the Blisses' house at Cookham. The scene is described in Act I as being "very comfortable and extremely untidy," which immediately suggests the informality of the family. Simon and Sorel, the children of David and Judith, immediately set the tempo of the play by their flippant and crisp conversation in which they foreshadow the character of Judith, an ex-actress who lives continually in a theatrical world, never coming down

1. The Vortex and This Was a Man have well ordered, strong third acts.

to earth and the practical things of life. In the first part of the act, we become acquainted with the character types of the four members of the family and we are made to anticipate the arrival of the four guests who appear before the act closes. The incongruous situations[1] which develop as a result of the informal behavior of the Blisses when the guests arrive afford many delightful surprises and moments of suspense. One feels toward the close of the act an accelerated movement; the crises occur a little more frequently and the surprises begin to intensify.

The second act opens with all the characters involved in the playing of a parlor guessing game. This scene demonstrates the dramatist's ability to make a great deal out of nothing; it is all "fluff," but it makes possible an excellent portrayal of the character of Judith. She enjoys acting out the charades and showing the others how they should be done. The game, as one might expect, leads to a squabble, and the

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1. Many incongruous situations are found in The Marquise, I'll Leave It to You, and Post Mortem. We find such scenes in The Marquise as the one in which Eloise locks Raoul in the library and forces Father Clement to marry, at the point of a pistol, Adrienne and Jacques. Raoul beats on the door. Also while Raoul and Esteban are fighting a duel, Eloise sits on the spinet desk and referees while she eats an orange. I'll Leave It to You is built upon the incongruity of Uncle Daniel telling each of the children that he has singled him or her out to inherit his fortune. Post Mortem contains incongruous situations brought about by the return to life of a war victim who visits his relatives and friends.

movement from that point on is quicker. There is a rapid ascent of crises, each of greater intensity than the previous one. The scene, first of all, between Richard, one of the guests, and Judith is an example of the type of minor crises of the play. Judith, by clever design and scheming, leads Richard to the climactic moment of a kiss, and then, much to Richard's consternation, threatens to tell all to David, her husband. Other farcical scenes which are equally as hilarious and amusing follow in rapid succession.[1] The final one in which Judith cries out dramatically, "Would you tear the very heart out of me...You have ruined my life. I have nothing left - nothing. God in Heaven where am I to turn for help,"[2] and then faints, brings down the curtain, while the various guests look on dazed and aghast. The second act of this play is perhaps the funniest of any which Mr. Coward has written; in it are blended comic and farcical elements in a pattern which, though controlled and balanced, is most delightful. The action here, contrary to the general tendency, centers in the farcical elements of the situations rather than in the ideas. But the action of the dialogue is just as keen as it is in the other plays.

The third act of the play is very short and contains little or no action. The only things that happen at all are

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1. The Marquise contains more farcical scenes than any play besides Hay Fever.
2. II, 560.

the departure of the guests, which is very stealthy, and the stage business of eating breakfast. In the first place, the guests have breakfast and plan their departure without saying polite farewells to their hosts. After they leave the set to assemble their baggage, the Blisses gather for breakfast. Again there is perfect parallelism of situation.[1] The Blisses are utterly oblivious to and unconcerned regarding the whereabouts of their guests; in fact, they seem to have forgotten they are there until they hear the door slam, announcing their departure. Judith merely exclaims, "How very rude," and they go on with their discussion of other things. They are back where they started from at the opening of the play; the structure is circular. There is in this very short act some padding. The discussion about hiccoughs and people dying of such, and the amount to tip the maid, seems unnecessary to the play as a whole. The movement of the act is considerably slower than that of the two previous acts, and the dialogue is not as brilliant or as witty.

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1. Some plays that show parallelism of situation are: This Was a Man, I'll Leave It to You, and Home Chat.

In This Was a Man, flirtatious scenes between Evie and Carol are parallel to those between Edward and Zoe.

In I'll Leave It to You, the various scenes between Uncle Daniel and the children are parallel. He promises each of them the same thing, and their reactions are similar.

In Home Chat, Lavinia's distrust of Peter is paralleled with Paul's distrust of Janet. Mavis' affection for Paul is parallel to Janet's affection for Alec.

There is little plot to Private Lives, and what there is, is presented in the first act. We find Amanda and Elyot, formerly married to each other, have come to the same hotel in France for their second honeymoons with their new mates, Victor and Sibyl. Amanda and Elyot soon discover each other, and finding that they are still very much in love, decide to run away immediately to Paris, leaving Victor and Sibyl behind. That is all there is to the story except at the close of the third act, we see Amanda and Elyot again going off with each other. The story of Private Lives is the least important element of the play; it is the reaction of the characters to the forces of life and the circumstances in which they find themselves that is important.

Surely there is no other play that has ever been written which contains as many absolute parallels and reversals as Private Lives. They extend beyond the character types to include the situations, the dialogue, the settings, the presentation of the ideas, and the action. Every word, every action, every entrance and exit are carefully measured so that the balance will be perfectly maintained throughout; yet the mechanism of the structure is so delicately manipulated that it never obtrudes, and even by the least observant playgoer, it must be keenly felt. In this carefully designed pattern lies Mr. Coward's genius. Any clever playwright might decide to write a play based upon the

use of parallels and reversals, but not anyone could attain the masterpiece of Private Lives. Mr. Coward is perfectly at home with his medium; he juggles the parallelisms and reversals in such a delightful and uncanny manner that the highly improbable situations, based entirely upon coincidence, even take on the verisimilitude of life. It is, as Mr. Walter Eaton says, "all fluff, spun sugar, if you like. A bit, and it is gone, but of its kind a little masterpiece."[1] And there is also, despite the "fluff" and the balance of the structure, an undercurrent of deep meaning; the psychology of marriage and the trivialities which spell its doom are skillfully treated.

At the opening of the play, we receive immediately the feeling of measure and balance when the curtain rises, for the set, a terrace of a hotel in France, is divided exactly in the middle by a small line of trees in tubs. There are two identical balconies representing the two suites of the hotel occupants. The situations which develop and the action which takes place on this geometrically designed set are also controlled and balanced. First, one sees Sibyl and Elyot, newlyweds; Sibyl is quite unsophisticated and has not been married before. Elyot has been married before and is very worldly wise and blase. They discuss and argue about Elyot's former

1. Eaton, Walter P., "Plays and Players," New York Herald Tribune, Section xi, March 1, 1931, p. 17.

marriage to Amanda . Following this, there is a very similar scene between Amanda and Victor, who are the counterparts of Sibyl and Elyot. Amanda is very scintillating and sophisticated; Victor is very stodgy and matter of fact. They discuss and argue about Amanda's former marriage to Elyot, just as Elyot and Sibyl have argued about the same matter, from Elyot's viewpoint. Next there is a scene in which Amanda and Elyot discover each other; this is balanced later on by one in which Sibyl and Victor become acquainted. After the discovery, there is a scene between Elyot and Sibyl in which Elyot tells Sibyl that they must depart immediately. But Sibyl does not wish to leave and they argue and bicker until they almost fight. Following this there is an almost identical scene in which Amanda tells Victor they must leave immediately, but Victor staunchly refuses; they squabble and almost fight. Then we see Amanda and Elyot again together; they discuss their new mates in much the same manner as they themselves have been discussed before; then they bicker, then make love, and finally decide to run away together. This of course is the high moment of the act. During these various balanced scenes, the movement of the act goes steadily forward, increasing in tempo and suspense. During all these scenes, the dialogue is carefully balanced and controlled; the speeches approximate the same length, and the thought

contained in them is proportionate. Even the use of stage properties receives parallel treatment. Elyot is seen carrying a tray upon which are two cocktails; he places them on the table on one side of the stage set. Almost immediately afterwards, Amanda comes out of her suite carrying a tray containing two cocktails; she places them on the table on the other side of the stage. Elyot's cocktails were of course meant for him and Sibyl, and Amanda's were meant for her and Victor, but Mr. Coward juggles the situations so that Amanda and Elyot drink together, and, at the close of the act, Victor and Sibyl drink, with forced gaiety, to "absent friends."

Mr. Coward says of the second act of Private Lives:

> It was more tricky and full of pitfalls than anything I have ever attempted...As a general rule the considerate author provides lifelines for his actors, in the shape of sharply etched cameos for the subsidiary members of the cast who can make bustling little entrances and exits in order to break the monotony. He may even, on occasion, actually provide a sustained plot for them to hang on to when all else fails.[1]

But there is no plot development in the second act of Private Lives; there are no exits and entrances. The only characters who appear in the entire act until just before the curtain falls are the two principals, Amanda and Elyot.[2] Sibyl and

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1. Play Parade, Intro., p. xiii.
2. The second act of This Was a Man shows similarities to that of Private Lives and Fallen Angels. The entire action takes place between the two principals; except for the entrances and exits of a manservant who serves the dinner, they are the only characters who appear during the act.

Victor arrive upon the scene only in time to witness the tail end of the free for all tumble on the floor indulged in by the leading characters. The fact that the dramatist can hold in rapt suspense the attention of his audience for forty minutes while two people do little more than converse is indeed a rare dramatic feat. But the rising action, the use of several crises which increase in momentum and tension, is keenly felt; it is centered in the dialogue and the bickering among the characters. It is also centered in the ideas presented, for Mr. Coward's satiric shafts bring into play the powers of reflection and analysis of the playgoer. The action which takes place at the very close of the act is in direct contrast to the lack of it in the time preceding. The scene in which Amanda and Elyot roll about on the floor, knocking over all the furniture, lamps, etcetera, is full of dramatic hokum,[1] and the expression on the faces of Victor and Sibyl who enter at this point is highly amusing. One of the most clever crises of the act is the scene on the sofa; it is loaded with theatrical exhilaration and suspense. It is risqué but delicately handled.[2]

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1. In Sirocco, we find a scene at the close of the third act in which the principals of the play also roll about on the floor in heated battle; but in Sirocco the scene is not amusing; it is very melodramatic. In The Marquise, also in the third act, there is a fight with rapiers between the two principal men of the play. It is a very amusing scene.

2. Risqué scenes are found in many of Mr. Coward's plays, such as The Vortex, This Was a Man, Sirocco, Home Chat, The Queen Was In the Parlor, Pointe Valaine. Nowhere are they handled as delicately as they are in Private Lives.

The third act of Private Lives was to me a keen disappointment when I saw it on the stage despite the fact that it picks up the threads of the story as they were left dangling at the close of the first act; the element of suspense is adroitly maintained until the final curtain, for we are never quite sure just who will finally decide to live with whom until that point. The characters are juggled in many symmetrical patterns similar to those of the first act, and the dialogue is clever. There is, however, on the whole an inferior quality to that of the two previous acts, for the tempo is decreased, the crises are not as delightful, and the dialogue is not nearly as brilliant as that of the preceding acts. Also the action occurs more in the realm of the physical than in the mental; however, the bickering among the characters constitutes a large part of the action. The breakfast scene was somewhat long for the brisk tone of the play and contained some unnecessary padding; however it served to increase the suspense by holding off the solution.

Design for Living contains considerably more plot than any of the other comedies of manners, and therefore seems to have more body and substance. The story centers about Otto and Leo and Gilda who all love each other. Otto, a portrait painter, and Leo, a dramatist, have been friends a long time and have also been acquainted with Gilda since the days when they were

not famous or successful. The play opens in Otto's studio in Paris. Ernest Friedman, a picture dealer and a loyal friend, comes to call. We learn from the conversation between him and Gilda much of the information necessary for satisfactory and concise exposition. We learn, among other things, that Gilda is living with Otto, that Leo has just returned from America, ebullient with the success of a new play, that Gilda is getting sick of the studio though she insists upon her love for Otto. During this expository scene the action moves along at a pretty even pace, but it is soon quickened by the appearance of Otto. Gilda had just told Ernest that Otto was asleep in the next room, having suffered all night with neuralgia; we know as soon as Otto appears that someone else in in the bedroom, for Gilda flurriedly hurries Otto and Ernest off to find Leo at his hotel. As they go off, Otto exclaims to Ernest, "She's crazy about me, poor little thing; just crazy about me."[1] At that point, Leo, who has spent the night with Gilda for the first time, emerges from the bedroom. In this manner, Mr. Coward rapidly increases the tempo of the play as well as the interest of the audience; it is a most effective bit of dramaturgy. Shortly Otto returns and finds Leo and Gilda laughing at him; it is too much for Otto, and the curtain falls on the high note of Otto's dramatic

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1. I, 18.

departure in which he exclaims, "I wish you were dead and in hell."[1]

At the opening of the second act, eighteen months have passed since the climactic departure of Otto. The act is divided into three scenes, each of which is paralleled against the other in that Gilda is seen with the three men respectively, Leo, Otto, and Ernest. In the first scene, Gilda and Leo are living together in London. Leo, a very successful dramatist, is thoroughly enjoying the fruits of his success, but Gilda is restless and bored by it. In the second scene, while Leo is away at a house party, Otto returns, and Gilda takes up with him where she left off previously. In the third scene, Gilda has decided to run away from both Otto and Leo; Ernest calls, and with him for her "safety valve"[2] (she says) she goes off with him. The plan of this act shows Mr. Coward's skill in the use of parallelisms in a manner different from that of Private Lives. The balance is established by a paralleling and reversing of some of the situations of the first act, and by having a proportionate amount of time for the three scenes between Gilda and the three men. Such little things illustrate the use of parallelisms as the lie which Gilda tells Ernest. We have noted that she told Ernest, in the first act, that Otto was asleep in the next room when Leo

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1. I, 29.
2. II, iii, 63.

was in there; now she tells him Leo is asleep when Otto is in there.

Mr. Coward says that the title of Design for Living was ironic rather than dogmatic;[1] but the theatre-goer has not this information when he attends the play. Perhaps even the sophisticated playgoer may look for some design as he watches the progress of the play. This, it seems to me, is just another expression of the author's delightful toying with his audience. The suspense is maintained by the curiosity as to the outcome of this triangular pattern of lives; for, surely, it seems that at least according to all the rules, Gilda must eventually choose one of the men! The minor crises of the second act occur when Gilda switches from one man to the other. But the major crisis is the drunk scene between Leo and Otto, at the end of the act. Mr. Coward is unusually adept with such scenes; he possesses a thorough understanding of the behavior pattern of individuals in the various and increasing stages of intoxication.[2]

Much of the action, both in the first and second acts, is centered in the play of ideas and the undercurrent of deep meaning. The characters say a great deal about love and relationships and the nature and temperament of artistic people; the touch lightens where the thought tends to become weighty,

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1. Play Parade, Intro., p. xvi.
2. We have already noted this treatment in Fallen Angels (Act II) and Private Lives (Act II). The Marquise also contains an elaborate drinking scene (Act III). In most of Mr. Coward's plays cocktails are freely drunk, and cocktail accessories are a part of almost every set.

and again we note Mr. Coward's cleverness in placing some of the action in the reflective powers of the audience.

The third act of Design for Living is rather bad. It lacks the flow and grace of the two previous acts; it contains more padding, and exists, in a measure at least, for the conventional demands of the theatre. Also, it has a farcical quality about it which is hardly in keeping with the substance of the two previous acts. It is divided into two scenes, and takes place two years later than the second act. In the first scene, we find Gilda, married to Ernest, and living in New York. She is less vital, more poised and a little more hardened than she was heretofore. She is entertaining some friends, and at the same time attempts to put over a business deal; she has become a professional decorator. The minor crises of the act begin to occur when the doorbell rings, announcing the arrival of Leo and Otto. Gilda is not present when they arrive, thus the suspense of their meeting is held off a little longer. The farcical conversation between Leo and Otto, and the guests, serves as direct reversal to the more resonant tone of that between the major characters of the play. Gilda's return to the scene affords another minor crisis and the time when she sends the boys off on the heels of the departing guests with a latch key to return in ten minutes, is another. Scene two, the next morning,

opens with the return of Ernest. The interest and delight of the audience are again keenly stimulated by the appearance of Otto and Leo, clad in Ernest's pajamas. Gilda, who had left home the night before while Otto and Leo were gone, returns. The climactic moment of the act is her announcement that she is going off with Otto and Leo. By this, we see again that Mr. Coward offers no solution to the problems he has presented.

The structure of Design for Living presents some interesting variations to those of the other comedies of manners discussed; it contains more plot, more substance, more changes in situations, and a different set for each act. There is, on the whole, more physical movement throughout the play than there is in the other comedies of manners.

We have analyzed Mr. Coward's formula for structure for his comedies of manners and have illustrated it by the four most representative plays of this genre. We have not traced the development of his formula through the comedies of manners of the first three phases because the changes are not sufficient to justify the attempt to trace them through. There is, of course, improvement in the ease and quality of the design. Chiefly, the improvement lies in the elements of measure and balance. While Mr. Coward's structural formula is controlled, artificial and highly suggestive of the "well-made" play, his

ease of execution conceals the mechanistic design. His sense of the theatre and his instinct for the handling of situations and scenes are unusually acute.

PART II CHAPTER IV

NOEL COWARD'S THEMATIC MATERIAL

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Noel Coward's chief contribution to the comedy of manners lies in the thematic content of his plays. With incisive, satirical wit, he criticizes and reveals the intimate structure of the post-war upper aristocratic society, and displays its follies and weaknesses. He satirizes the irrationality, the illogicality and the absurdity of the laws, the conventions and the principles upon which modern society is founded. It is his purpose to show man his faults as a social being.

This lofty purpose is not without roots in the trends of modern drama. Since the last decade of the Nineteenth Century the chief purpose of the dramatists has been to reveal the intimate structure of society, to dissect it and to censure its ills. The modern dramatists often consider "that society has become the tyrant of the universe."[1] They are objective in their attitude and feel that the inconsistencies and injustices which confront the individual are the faults of our social institutions. This questioning attitude toward the existing laws and customs of society was a thing unheard of before the time of Ibsen; but now every form of drama is tinged

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1. Henderson, Archibald, Changing Drama, Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd Co., 1919, p. 12.

with a sociological or a psychological outlook. A survey of the field of modern drama indicates the fact that the more important dramatists have generally directed their attention toward serious philosophical and social drama.

There are concurring throughout Mr. Coward's comedies of manners two major themes which have their roots in the naturalistic movement, or , more specifically, the modern drama of social consciousness. Less deeply rooted are three minor themes. The major themes are (1) a serious concern for the institution of marriage and the inevitable problems of marital and extra-marital relations, (2) an intense hatred of the sham, the artificiality, the waste, the futility and the emptiness of upper aristocratic society, its customs, institutions and manners. The minor themes are: (1) an exhortation to duty, (2) an evaluation of modern love, and (3) a concern for the tragic effects which many aspects of modern life have upon the youth of aristocratic society. To expose satirically the absurdity and the ridiculousness of mankind, especially the type of mankind with which Mr. Coward peoples his plays, is the underlying purpose in all of these themes. We will discuss Mr. Coward's treatment and expression of these themes which are found in the comedies of manners of the first three phases of his dramatic career.

The plays in which the problems of marriage are treated

and which we shall discuss are:

FIRST PHASE:	The Young Idea The Rat Trap
SECOND PHASE:	Fallen Angels This Was a Man Home Chat The Vortex Easy Virtue Sirocco
THIRD PHASE:	Private Lives Design for Living

The problems of marriage are the chief targets for the modern dramatists who attack society;[1] they are the chief targets for Mr. Coward's satiric portrayal of modern, high society life. In all but two of his comedies of manners (I'll Leave It to You and Hay Fever) the problems of marriage are the subject matter; but his attitude toward and treatment of these problems show considerable change with the years.

In the plays of the first phase, he gives no indication of doubt as to the validity of marriage as a social institution. Rather he insists that society's claim and custom must not be ignored; he feels that, despite its problems, marriage is a state worthy of sacrifice, and one whose sacred tenets should be respected and adhered to. While, in these early plays, Mr. Coward presents a somewhat realistic picture of metropolitan, contemporary society life, the treatment of the themes relative

1. In the Restoration matrimony was generally ridiculed by the dramatists, but the problems of marriage did not receive emphasis. See p. 7.

to marriage problems is romantic or melodramatic; and the plays end on a conventional and sentimental note. Too, in these very early plays, there is no emphasis upon sex and sex adventure; the sex element is present, but it is not obtrusive.

The ideal of romantic love in marriage and a condemnation of divorce is the major theme of The Young Idea. Gerda and Sholto bend every effort toward a reconciliation of their divorced parents, which is happily and romantically effected at the close of the play when George says to Jennifer (his first wife):

> You love me! You love me! You've wanted me all these years as much as I have wanted you. The sight of you has completely annihilated the time we've been parted...(thirteen years) (III, 957)

Mr. Coward seems to advance the "Dear Brutus" philosophy of Barrie which is that our original partners are the best after all. Also he wishes to say that divorce does not bring happiness or solution to the problems of marriage.

The Rat Trap has for its major theme the problems of marriage after the novelty has worn off. It is a serious study of the marriage of two writers who are deeply in love and intensely devoted to their careers. It may be that the young writer is trying to say that a career and marriage cannot successfully blend for a woman; but marriage as a dignified

and sacred institution is presented in the play. Sheila Maxwell makes every conceivable sacrifice to make her marriage successful and happy; she considers it of far greater importance than her career which she sacrifices to it. Although Keld, her husband, behaves like a despicable cad, is unappreciative of Sheila's sacrifices, goes off and has an affair with a third-rate actress, Sheila dutifully forgives him. At the close of the play, although she says she no longer has any love for him, she states, "I might just regain it suddenly - you never know."[1] The play closes on the melodramatic note that though Sheila has suffered, Keld has reformed, and they are expecting the birth of a child.

Although The Rat Trap is treated in a serious, sentimental manner, it is important for what it indicates. The problems of marriage, solemnly presented here, are the same ones which later become the targets for Mr. Coward's satiric shafts. They are: boredom, satiation, restlessness, irritability, quarrelling and nagging, jealousy and infidelity.

In the interval of time between the writing of The Rat Trap and the publication of the plays of the second phase, Mr. Coward's attitude toward marriage seems to have changed considerably. He has become appalled and sickened by what he sees going on about him in the lives of married folk. The

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1. III, 87.

people he writes about lightly regard their marriage vows, if they regard them at all. They enter matrimony without consideration for its serious intent and purposes; they are flippant and irreverent in their attitude, and feel that they may walk out as easily as they entered with never a qualm or pang of conscience. They feel that if they are bored and satiated, they are justified to indulge in promiscuity and infidelity. They move in a world in which the game of sex is the sole amusement of society. Certainly the virulent attack upon marriage as he sees it in contemporary society indicates that Mr. Coward does not believe in marriage if it must be conducted along the lines of modern expression. I do not think we get the impression from his plays that he does not believe in marriage. He mocks it as an institution of the church, but he surely thinks it is expedient for those who are willing to consider it seriously, and who do not expect too much of each other. He does not approve of it as he sees it in the lives of the idle rich.

Mr. Coward gives forcible vent to his disgust by a very scathing, sardonic satire in the plays of the second phase. At times he is so swept away by his revulsion and his desire for "enlightenment" that wit and the more airy qualities of comedy are sacrificed. He has been accused of having a depraved mind; but as he views the world it is in a depraved

condition, and he wishes to give a realistic, satiric presentation of this world.

The chief problems of marriage in the ummoral society which Mr. Coward depicts are: boredom, satiation, restlessness, vapidity, jealousy, idleness, promiscuity, infidelity, nagging, quarrelling, and selfishness. It seems, however, that boredom, idleness and selfishness are the main causes for the miseries and distortions of the marriage state; and it is ever true that idleness and selfishness beget boredom.

Boredom and neglect are the principal problems of Fallen Angels. Here Mr. Coward is jabbing very pointedly the English gentlemen who feel themselves sufficient prizes for their wives, and who feel that passion and romance are qualities not essential for happiness in marriage. They do not realize that their neglect and their lukewarm attitude bring boredom to their wives. We find Fred and Julia saying:

> Julia: One can't be really in love without passion, that's why I said we weren't in love any more.
>
> Fred: Don't be annoying, Julia, you know perfectly well we've reached a remarkable sublime plane of affection and good comradeship, far above -
>
> Julia: Just ordinary "being in love"... I quite agree. (I, 12)

And Julia and Jane discuss their bored state as follows:

> Julia: As is usual in such cases - after a certain time, the first ecstasies of passionate adoration subside, leaving in some instances an arid waste of discontent -
>
> Jane: Lovely - darling!
>
> Julia: In some instances rank boredom and rampant adultery on both sides -
>
> Jane: Don't be gross, dear.
>
> Julia: And in other rarer instances such as ours complete happiness and tranquility devoid of violent emotions of any kind with the possible exception of golf.
>
> Jane: Quite.
>
> Julia: And there lies the trouble - the lack of violent emotion, fireworks, etc. (I, 23)

Infidelity, promiscuity, boredom, and a lack of any serious consideration for the marriage vows are the problems of marriage which are presented in <u>This Was a Man</u>. This play gives a very bitter, satiric picture of marriage in the lives of the idle rich. One feels that if conditions in marriage are as bad as they are depicted, that surely there is something wrong with a society that allows such conditions to exist. The characters, Edward and Zoe, seem to voice Mr. Coward's attitude toward marriage at this time:

> Zoe: It's the obvious result of the "Barriers down" phase through which we seem to be passing. Everyone is at close quarters with everyone else. There's no more glamour. Everything's indefinite and blurred except sex, so people are instinctively turning to that with a rather jaded vigor. It's pathetic when you begin to analyse it...

> Edward: I loathe this age and everything to do with it. Men of my sort are the products of over-civilization. All the red-blooded, honest-to-God emotions have been squeezed out of us. We're incapable of hating enough or loving enough. When any big moment comes along, good or bad, we hedge around it, arguing, weighing it in the balance of reason and psychology, trying to readjust the values until there's nothing left and nothing achieved. I wish I were primitive enough to thrash Carol and drive her out of my life forever - or strong enough to hold her - but I'm not. I'm just an ass - an intelligent, spineless ass! (I, 40-42)

Something of the modern attitude toward marriage is indicated by the following dialogue between Edward and Evelyn:

> Evelyn: Hang it all man, she is your wife.
>
> Edward: I'm not a man of property.
>
> Evelyn: What do you mean?
>
> Edward: I mean I can't look on Carol as a sort of American trunk.
>
> Evelyn: What are you talking about?
>
> Edward: She's a human being, not an inanimate object over which I can assert legal rights.
>
> Evelyn: If all husbands adopted that tone, England would be in a nice state.
>
> Edward: It is in a nice state. (I, 56-57)

And Zoe further illustrates the modern attitude when she says, "What's the use of going on with a thing that's dead and done for?"[1]

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1. I, 45.

Jealousy and lack of trust are the problems of marriage presented in Home Chat. Also some very pointed satire is directed against those people who are ever ready to believe any gossip regardless of the fact that it may not have any actual truth. But the characters of this play, though they have been accused unjustly, are little hurt thereby. What Mr. Coward is trying to show probably is that it doesn't matter whether the characters are unfaithful or not; if they are open to promiscuity, they might just as well be accused of it when they are not guilty as when they are.

The Vortex presents much the same hectic group of worthless, restless society people as we find in This Was a Man. The marriage problem here which receives the major emphasis is that of selfishness. Florence, a very selfish wife and mother, is miserable because her selfishness has ruined the lives of her husband and son.

Mr. Coward's criticism of marriage is presented from two viewpoints in Easy Virtue. He seems to take a stand against the old fashioned order of marriage and defends the freedom and lawlessness of the modern attitude; but Larita, who represents the modern attitude, is not happy. It seems that Mr. Coward is saying here that although the modern way is anything but what it should be, the old fashioned way is

certainly not the ideal either; in other words, a happy medium between the two might offer a solution if ever such could be obtained. But he does not suggest that it can be.

Sirocco again trots out the theme of a wife's infidelity caused by neglect and coldness on the part of the husband, which is also in Fallen Angels; but the treatment of the theme is entirely different here. This is the most sensational and revolting of all of Mr. Coward's plays; the sensuality of the play is nauseating. The same theme treated in Fallen Angels is handled with a lightness and dexterity of touch, and the psychological aspect is given emphasis over that of the physical. Although, in Sirocco, Mr. Coward seems to justify the heroine for her excursion down the "primrose path," he also emphasizes the disillusionment following such an excursion.

The theme of marriage problems continues to hold an important place in the comedies of manners of the third phase, but the satire is much less vehement and sardonic. It is, however, not a mild satire; it is biting, audacious and cutting. One might say that the dramatist has changed from cynic in the second phase to skeptic in the third. The wit of these plays goes hand in hand with the satire of derisive laughter, and the theme is only a part of the whole pattern; it is not the predominating element of the plays as it is in the plays of

the second phase.

The major theme of Private Lives is marriage treated from a psychological aspect. Here Mr. Coward not only presents the problems of marriage, but also makes some effort to explain the cause of them. The crux of marriage difficulties seems to lie in the fact that the little trite things of everyday existence spoil the harmony and happiness of marriage. It seems that Mr. Coward is saying that people expect too much of marriage; they expect it to be perfect, they set up rigid, romantic standards of excellence and when their lives fail to conform to that standard, they are disillusioned, bored and disappointed. But they also find that divorce does not solve their problems. Here, he again reverts to the theme expressed in The Young Idea that perhaps our first mates are best after all. Elyot says to Amanda , "More than any desire anywhere, deep down in my deepest heart I want you back again - please."[1] But Mr. Coward's attitude toward marriage seems to be summed up very briefly by Amanda and Elyot:

> Amanda: I feel rather scared of marriage really.
>
> Elyot: It is a rather frowsy business. (II, 219)

A lack of reverence for marriage as an institution of the church is indicated by the following dialogue:

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1. I, 212.

Amanda: How long, Oh Lord, how long?

Elyot: What do you mean, "How long, Oh Lord, how long?"

Amanda: This is far too perfect to last.

Elyot: You have no faith, that's what's wrong with you.

Amanda: Absolutely none.

Elyot: Don't you believe in ____?
(he nods upwards)

Amanda: Oh dear no.

Elyot: (shaking his head) No. What about ____?
(he points downward)

Amanda: Oh dear no.

Elyot: Don't you believe in anything?

Amanda: Oh yes, I believe in being kind to everyone, and giving money to old beggar women, and being as gay as possible. (II, 226)

In Design for Living Mr. Coward presents a group of people for whom the bonds of marriage are not suited. He suggests that when marriage does not suit, people should not be expected to adapt themselves to it. Again he satirizes the institution of marriage as a sacred, religious one. Leo, after living with Gilda for some time, suggests marriage:

Leo: It might be rather fun. We'd get a lot more presents than if we'd done it before.

Gilda: A very grand marriage. St. Margaret's, Westminster?

Leo: Yes, with a tremendous "do" at Claridge's afterwards.

Gilda: The honeymoon would be thrilling, wouldn't it? Just you and me, alone, finding out about each other.

Leo: I'd be very gentle with you, very tender.

Gilda: You'd get a sock in the jaw, if you were.

Leo: (shocked) Oh, how volgar! How inexpressibly volgar!

Gilda: It's an enjoyable idea to play with, isn't it?

Leo: Let's do it.

Gilda: Stop, stop, stop, you're rushing me off my feet!

Leo: No, but seriously, it's a much better plan than you think. It would ease small social situations enormously. The more successful I become, the more complicated everything's going to get. Let's do it, Gilda.

Gilda: No.

Leo: Why not?

Gilda: It wouldn't do. Really, it wouldn't.

Leo: I think you're wrong.

Gilda: It doesn't matter enough about the small social situations, those don't concern me anyway. They never have and they never will. I shouldn't feel cozy married! It would upset my moral principles.

Leo: Doesn't the eye of Heaven mean anything to you?

Gilda: Only when it winks.

Leo: God knows it ought to wink enough at our marriage. (II, i, 33-34)

Although Mr. Coward is more tolerant in his attitude toward marriage in these plays of the third phase, he does not present or suggest any solution to the inevitable problems of it. He satirizes them audaciously and scathingly; he mirrors them accurately and cleverly; but he does not solve them. It is society's problem.

Mr. Coward expresses in his plays throughout his dramatic career a genuine impatience with the sham, the artificiality, the waste and the futility which he sees in the lives and manners of upper aristocratic society. He expresses his impatience in the form of satiric attacks upon modernity and upon respectability. He castigates the behavior and the emptiness of modern society life, with its post-war sophistication; but he also decries, with equal vigor, the narrow, hide-bound conventionalities of the pre-war respectable society. Sometimes he directs his ridicule against an English social group representing modern sophistication; sometimes he directs it against an English social group representing hide-bound respectability. He hates dullness and hypocrisy and is merciless in his presentation of a social set who have money and tradition but who are not intellectually emancipated and sophisticated. Sometimes he satirizes the Continental peoples, representing modernity. In order to make his satiric attacks effective dramatically, he often presents the impact of respectability upon modernity, or vice versa. Sometimes he

seems to take sides, first with the one, then with the other; but, upon reflection, it seems that he does not vacillate in his attitude. What he is trying to show is that as long as sham, hypocrisy, stupidity and idleness exist in any form of society, there will be social problems and sores. Also he attacks the sham and hypocrisy which he sees in religion and the press, and he often mocks the dramatic critics and their use of stereotyped phrases.

The comedies of manners which are most illustrative of this second major theme are:

FIRST PHASE:	I'll Leave It to You
	The Young Idea
SECOND PHASE:	The Vortex
	Hay Fever
	Easy Virtue
	Fallen Angels
	This Was a Man
	Home Chat
	Sirocco
THIRD PHASE:	Private Lives
	Design for Living

The satire used to express the theme of I'll Leave It to You is very mild. Here Mr. Coward holds up to ridicule a group of young people who have been thrown at loose ends by the conditions of the post-war world. They are a very helpless group of youngsters who have always considered that they were not to do any work. A picture of the uselessness of their lives is shown by the following dialogue:

Daniel: What does Sylvia do?

Mrs. Dermott: Oh, she helps me.

Daniel: In what way?

Mrs. Dermott: Oh - er - she - well - she does her flowers, and comes calling with me, and she's invaluable at jumble sales, when we have them. (I, 16)

Mr. Coward attacks in The Young Idea the aimlessness and the waste in the English County society who are devoted to hunting. The satiric attack is much more virulent than that of I'll Leave It to You, but it is mild compared with that of the plays of the second phase. It prognosticates Mr. Coward's abilities in the direction of satiric comedy. He very cleverly contrasts the English hunting folk against the continental types as exemplified by George Brent's children. What George says to Cicely, his second wife, when the children are expected for a visit, shows this contrast:

You're sure to be a novelty to them, at any rate. They've spent all their lives on the Continent among a very haphazard set. It will be interesting for them to come to an English hunting county, where immorality is conducted by rules and regulations. (I, 909)

Again the contrast is shown by the following dialogue:

Sholto: It's the first time we've been to England, anyhow since we were tiny. So don't be cross if we're stupid about things. You see, living on the Continent, as we have -

> Gerda: It's all, naturally, new and thrilling to us here. You can't imagine how funny it is, everything being grey instead of brightly colored, and everyone talking English, and not waving their arms and - (I, 918)

The following dialogue shows the vacuous lives of this social set:

> Gerda: Have you been hunting all day?
>
> Claud: Yes.
>
> Sholto: Did you find anything?
>
> Priscilla: Oh, dear, - That's very funny! Oh dear!
>
> Sholto: It was n't meant to be. I was only taking an intelligent interest.
>
> Gerda: Not intelligent, dear.
>
> Sholto: Now don't be superior, Gerda. You really know just as little about it as I do. You see we want to pick up all we can about hunting. So that we can get along in the groove.
>
> Claud: The what?
>
> Gerda: The groove. The hunting groove. You don't talk about much else down here, do you? You see, we're used to people who talk about everything - vice and art and food - and, of course, we don't want to be out of the swim. (I, 920)

Mr. Coward's sense of the emptiness of things in the lives of the idle rich is keenly expressed in the comedies of manners of the second phase. In many of the plays he expresses a thorough disgust with the hollow, wasteful existence of the social set in which he himself holds membership. In The Vortex,

he gives his most realistic picture of the utter vapidity, the hectic nervousness, and the self-centered emptiness of the post-war aristocracy. Here he is very impatient with the perpetual striving which the characters, who epitomize modern sophistication, make for frenzied amusement and relief from the trying monotony of their existence. Nicky sums up Mr. Coward's cynical reproaches of the society to which he belongs when he says, "It's no use pretending any more - our lives are built up of pretenses all the time."[1] Mr. Coward presents the idea that the faults of society may be laid at the doorstep of civilization with its laws and customs. Nicky says, "Civilization makes rottenness so much easier,"[2] and "How can we help ourselves? We swirl about in a vortex of beastliness."[3]

As in The Vortex, the satire of Hay Fever is directed against the aimless living of the idle rich, but here the satire is light, frivolous, nonsensical, and more in keeping with the type of satire generally associated with the comedy of manners. Mr. Coward, no doubt, derived much pleasure in creating the Bliss family who play delightfully at being landed gentry. He satirizes the vapidity of their lives but he does not seem to be disgusted with them for it. The impact of respectability and conventionality upon this modern,

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1. III, 490.
2. III, 493.
3. Ibid.

bohemian family of the Blisses is satirized in this, the breeziest of all of Mr. Coward's comedies. To this highly disarranged, bad mannered, unconventional household come to visit four guests who typify respectability, conventionality and sanity. The sophisticated children, Simon and Sorel, in discussing the anticipated arrival of one of the guests, indicate the nature of the Bliss household and the dignity of the guest:

> Sorel: He's a frightfully well-known diplomatist - I met him at the Mainwaring's dance.
>
> Simon: He'll need all his diplomacy here.
>
> Sorel: I warned him not to expect good manners, but I hope you'll be as pleasant to him as you can.
>
> Simon: I've never met any diplomatists, Sorel, but as a class I'm extremely prejudiced against them. They're so suave and polished and debonair.
>
> Sorel: You could be a little more polished without losing caste. (I, 503)

The ridiculous waste of their lives in their inane diversions is satirized in the following dialogue:

> Sorel: I sometimes wish we were more normal and bouncing, Simon.
>
> Simon: Why?
>
> Sorel: I should like to be a fresh, open-air girl with a passion for games.
>
> Simon: Thank God, you're not.

Sorel: It would be soothing.

Simon: Not in this house.

Sorel: Where's Mother?

Simon: In the garden, practising.

Sorel: Practising?

Simon: She's learning the names of the flowers by heart.

Sorel: What's she up to? (I, 502)

Judith's sole purpose for acquiring the superficial, botanical knowledge was to impress her visitor, a young boxer. In this lively, satirical play, Mr. Coward mocks the efforts of the Bliss family to escape from the inevitable boredom of their existence, and at the same time he satirizes both respectability and conventionality.

Mr. Coward says that he wrote Easy Virtue in reaction to Hay Fever which had been declared by the critics to be too tenuous and thin. Easy Virtue is indeed a very violent reaction. Here we find a bitter picture of a hide-bound, narrow, hypocritical, stodgy, old-fashioned family who represent one phase of English county society. While in Hay Fever the characters attempt to pose as county aristocracy, in Easy Virtue, they are county aristocracy. Easy Virtue exposes the hypocrisy of the Whittaker family by contrasting it against Larita, who marries into the family. Larita typifies modernism in the

extreme and also one type of Continental people. In this play, Mr. Coward takes sides with sophistication. He admires the straightforward, fast-living social set; for while they lack religious scruples, have a loose moral code, and seem disreputable to many observers, they face facts and are not hypocritical. They do not expect other people to conform to the pattern of their lives, nor do they meddle with the lives of others. The contrast of the two phases of society and the satiric attack upon hypocrisy are shown in the following dialogue:

> Larita: Your brain is so muddled with false values that you're incapable of grasping anything in the least real. Why am I a wicked woman?
>
> Mrs. Whittaker: You betrayed my son's honor by taking advantage of his youth and mad infatuation for you. He'd never have married you if he'd known.
>
> Larita: I suppose you wouldn't consider it betraying his honor if he'd had an affair with me and not married me?
>
> Mrs. Whittaker: It would certainly have been much more appropriate. (II, 216)

Further Larita says:

> You seem to be floundering about under the delusion that I'm a professional cocotte. You're quite wrong - I've never had an affair with a man I wasn't fond of. The only time I ever sold myself was in the eyes of God to my first husband - my mother arranged it. I was really too young to know what I was doing. You approve of that sort of bargaining, don't you? It's within the law. (II, 217-18)

Mr. Coward's violent attack upon respectability and conventionality is shown in Larita's speech as follows:

> I'm completely outside the bounds of your understanding - in every way. And yet I know you, Marion, through and through - far better than you know yourself. You're a pitiful figure, and there are thousands like you - victims of convention and upbringing. All your life you've ground down perfectly natural sex impulses, until your mind has become a morass of inhibitions - your repression has run into the usual channel of religious hysteria. You've placed physical purity too high and mental purity not high enough. And you'll be a miserable woman until the end of your days unless you readjust your balance. (II, 219)

Mr. Coward attacks the hypocrisy and false standards of religion as he sees it:[1]

> Larita: There are so many varying opinions as to what is straight and decent.
>
> Marion: God admits no varying opinions.
>
> Larita: Your religion must be wonderfully comforting. It makes you so sure of yourself. (II, 180)

The petty meannesses and the blind adherence to a stale and outworn moral code which the lives of these people express is an attack upon people who accept without questioning the religious tenets of their forefathers and who follow the letter of the law without ever stopping to consider the spirit of it.

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1. Mr. Coward attacks religion in like manner in Post Mortem. He holds up to ridicule a church bishop, the Bishop of Ketchworth (V, 407-408).

We have already pointed out that Fallen Angels presents a picture of waste, boredom and idleness in the lives of two society women. Here also we see the impact of Continental manners upon English respectability. Mr. Coward presents in a few deft strokes the difference between the Englishman and the Frenchman at the close of the play; the Englishmen are stodgy, dull, and slow of comprehension. The Frenchman is quick, clever, and able to handle a delicate situation adroitly.

Mr. Coward presents a very bitter picture of the vacuous, artificial lives of the idle rich in This Was a Man. The following dialogue between Zoe and Edward is illustrative of the vehemence of expression:

> Edward: It's pretty futile, isn't it?
>
> Zoe: Futile: I return after a year's oblivion, thrilled and excited, longing to see all my old friends, and what do I find? Clacking, shallow nonentities doing the same things, saying the same things, thinking the same things. They're stale. They seem to have lost all wit and charm, and restraint - or perhaps they never had any. Oh dear! I've never felt so depressed in all my life.
>
> Edward: One gets into the habit of accepting things at their surface value and not looking any deeper. (I, 32-33)

In this play Mr. Coward cleverly contrasts the character of Evie, who lives by the formulated codes of society against

the modern looseness of the other characters. Evie is pompous, athletic, very sure of himself; but when he attempts to subdue Carol, the very essence of modernity, he himself is subdued. Again, as in Easy Virtue, while the author decries modernity, he also castigates the formulated, stereotyped mode of society.

Hatred of falsehood, gossip, hypocrisy and sham is expressed in Home Chat.[1] The satiric expression of the theme is handled in a very clever manner; when Janet and Peter tell the truth they are not believed, and when they lie they are not believed either. Janet's speech indicates the type of mind found in the society of her world:

> Aren't people's minds frightful? Think of that room full of people yesterday, all well-born and well-bred and carefully brought up - all perfectly convinced that we shared a wagon-lit entirely for immoral purposes - unable to imagine any other angle on the situation, but just that man - you - woman - result obvious. Oh dear, it is depressing, isn't it? (II, 128)

Again the impact of a Continental type upon the staid, stodgy Anglo-Saxon is shown in Sirocco. The following dialogue is illustrative of the author's satiric attack upon the shallow hypocrisy of the Englishman:

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1. These receive Mr. Coward's most virulent attack in Post Mortem. Misrepresentations about war by those who will profit through it and lies scattered about by hypocrites, who wish to deceive the ignorant public so that they may profit thereby, are exposed. (v, 403-404)

> Lucy: You will keep laughing at me - I can see - I'm not such a fool as all that. You Southern people, you're all alike. Fireworks, fits and starts - you jeer at splendid bedrock things because you're incapable of understanding them.
>
> Sirio: I am not jeering, but I can see a little further than you can. I can see your splendid bedrock husband doing his business in Tunis, and in the evenings sitting with his friends - drinking cocktails - watching the women walking by. Oh, he is not unfaithful, I do not suppose that, but his thoughts are not very good. He is glad you are not there with him - he is a much bigger fellow when you are not there - he imagines himself in those women's arms. (II, ii, 56)

Private Lives and Design for Living which continue in the gay mood of Hay Fever suggest the Congrevean Comedy more than any other of Mr. Coward's comedies of manners. Although Mr. Coward, like Congreve, satirically exposes the frivolity and waste of the lives of his own social set, he is, nevertheless, fond of the people he portrays in these plays. Although they are unmoral, promiscuous, idle and shallow, they are honest and straightforward. And though they are dilletantes, lacking any sense of responsibility, they are clever; and sometimes cleverness is sufficient reason for being.

In both Private Lives and Design for Living we find again the theme of the impact of respectability upon modernity, although it is a minor theme in these plays. Amanda and Elyot (in Private Lives), sophisticated moderns, are contrasted against the dull respectability of Victor and Sibyl. In

Design for Living Ernest Friedman and the Carvers, the American visitors to his home, in the last act of the play, represent the narrow, conventional folk contrasted against the modernity of Gilda, Leo and Otto.

In Design for Living Mr. Coward satirizes the press and the dramatic critics.[1] Leo and Gilda are reading the reviews of a play which Leo has just produced:

> Gilda: The Daily Mail says it's daring and dramatic and witty.
>
> Leo: The Daily Express says it's disgusting.
>
> Gilda: I should be cut to the quick if it said anything else.
>
> Leo: The Daily Mirror, I regret to say, is a trifle carping.
>
> Gilda: Getting uppish, I see. Naughty little thing!
>
> Leo: (reading the Daily Mirror) "Change and Decay is gripping throughout. The characterization falters here and there, but the dialogue is polished and sustains a high level from first to last and is frequently witty, nay, even brilliant-" ...

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1. In the introduction to Play Parade, Mr. Coward also mocks the dramatic critics. He says, "They search busily behind the simplest of my phrases, like old ladies peering under the bed for burglars..." (p.vii) He takes pleasure in telling of the success enjoyed by Hay Fever which the press had described in terms which he says are "their stock phrases for anything later in date and lighter in texture than The Way of the World..." (p. xi) In Hay Fever he satirizes the press by the flattery paid to Judith in a newspaper column. (I, 515) In Home Chat he satirizes the press by the reports of Janet's and Peter's accident. (II, 125) In Post Mortem he makes his most vigorous attack upon the newspapers. (v, 403-404) Also he attacks the censorship of the drama in England. (v, 407-408)

> Leo: (still reading) "But" - here we go, dear! - "but the play, on the whole, is decidedly thin."
>
> Gilda: My God! They've noticed it. (II, i, 31)

Mr. Coward satirizes the newspaper reporters who come to interview celebrities.[1] Leo, the prototype of Mr. Coward, is engaged in conversation with Mr. Birbeck from the Standard:

> Mr. Birbeck: What is your opinion of the modern girl?
>
> Leo: Downright; straightforward; upright.
>
> Mr. Birbeck: You approve of the modern girl then?
>
> Leo: I didn't say so.
>
> Mr. Birbeck: What are your ideas on marriage?
>
> Leo: Garbled.
>
> Mr. Birbeck: That's good, that is. Very good! (II, i, 42)

Like many other modern dramatists, Mr. Coward's underlying purpose in exposing the expensive dust and ashes of society life is to indicate that it is man's duty to see and to correct his social weaknesses. In a minor vein, the theme

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1. In Pointe Valaine, the newspaper reporter is satirized in the person of Hilda James who interviews the novelist, Mortimer Quinn. It turns out that the novelist interviews the reporter rather than the reporter the novelist.

of duty is current in many of his plays; the word, duty, occurs very frequently in the dialogue, and we find also some specific exhortations to duty. We find: duty of parents to their children, duty of husbands and wives to each other and man's duty to himself.[1]

The duty of parents to their children is expressed in the following plays: I'll Leave It to You, The Young Idea, The Vortex, and Hay Fever.[2] The author directs some very mild criticism against a mother in I'll Leave It to You; he infers that it is the duty of parents to fit their children for the problems of life by giving them opportunities for vocational training. In The Young Idea he points out the effect of divorce upon the happiness of the children. He makes his most vehement exhortation to duty on the part of a mother to her son in The Vortex. The theme of parents' duty to their children intrudes ever so slightly in Hay Fever; the idea that a mother should look after her family is gently suggested.

An exhortation to duty on the part of wives and husbands in their relations to each other is suggested in the

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1. Man's duty to his country is not a theme of the comedies of manners, but we find it in The Queen Was in the Parlor, Post Mortem and Cavalcade. The idea that one's country must come before one's personal happiness is the theme of The Queen Was in the Parlor. (I, ii, 203) The idea of duty to one's country receives a bitter, satiric attack in Post Mortem. (i, 352) In Cavalcade Mr. Coward exalts the patriotic duty to one's country throughout the play.

2. In The Marquise, Mr. Coward infers that parents should not interfere with the pattern of their children's lives.

plays which treat of marriage problems. Mr. Coward infers that marriage means responsibilities, that marriage partners owe certain considerations and duties to each other, and that if these were regarded more seriously, marriage problems might be considerably less.

Mr. Coward presents man's obligations to himself, often in contrast to those which society has inflicted upon him. Self-restraint and an unthinking acceptance of the code of morality are not among the qualities of the society depicted in Mr. Coward's plays. Rather, the characters say that first of all they have a duty toward themselves which comes before their duty to society; perhaps it is only self-interest masquerading as duty. In all of the plays, man's interest in himself is evident, but Private Lives and Design for Living contain the best treatment of this theme. We find Amanda and Elyot in Private Lives, who believe in living for the moment, saying:

> Elyot: You mustn't be serious, my dear one, it's just what they want.
>
> Amanda: Who's they?
>
> Elyot: All the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable. Laugh at them. Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their sacred shibboleths. Flippancy brings out the acid in their damned sweetness and light. (II, 232)

And again Elyot says:

> Let's be superficial and pity the poor philosophers. Let's blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic school children. Let's savour the delight of the moment... (II, 232)

Man's duty to himself in the light of modern social conventions is treated in Design for Living. We find Otto and Gilda saying:

> Otto: ...We are different. Our lives are diametrically opposed to ordinary social conventions; and it's no use grabbing at those conventions to hold us up when we find we're in deep water. We've jilted them and eliminated them, and we've got to find our own solutions for our own peculiar problems.
>
> Gilda: Very glib, very glib indeed, and very plausible.
>
> Otto: It's true. There's no sense of stamping about and saying how degrading it all is. Of course it's degrading; according to a certain code, the whole situation's degrading and always has been. The Methodists wouldn't approve of us, and the Catholics wouldn't either; and the Evangelists and the Episcopalians and the Anglicans and the Christian Scientists - I don't suppose even the Polynesian Islanders would think very highly of us, but they wouldn't mind quite so much, being so far away. They could all club together - the whole lot of them - and say with perfect truth, according to their lights, that we were loose-living, irreligious, unmoral degenerates, couldn't they?
>
> Gilda: Yes, Otto, I expect so.
>
> Otto: But the whole point is, it's none of their business. We're not doing any harm to anyone else. We're not peppering the world

> with illegitimate children. The only people we could possibly mess up are ourselves, and that's our lookout... (II, ii, 58)

But Mrs. Whittaker in Easy Virtue does not agree with Otto and Gilda that it is none of their business. She reads aloud a letter she has written:

> Dear Mrs. Phillips - I feel it is my duty to write you with regard to the advisability of sending the unfortunate Rose Jenkins to London. As you know she was in my service for a year, and I was quite convinced when I discharged her that a girl of her character could ultimately come to no good end. I was therefore extremely surprised when I heard that you had engaged her. As you have appealed to me for advice in the matter, I suggest that you should get rid of her at once, as her presence in the village might quite conceivably corrupt the morals of the other girls... (I, 4-5)

The theme of love, which has always been of major importance in the history of the drama, receives new treatment by the modern dramatists compared with that of the Romanticists of earlier times.[1] Love, in modern drama, is often stripped bare of sentiment and is presented with candid and critical evaluation. This is a modern aspect for the age old theme which had formerly been considered by the Romanticists as a glorified state of being. The Romantic lover could do no wrong; he was on a plane apart from all other

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1. Mr. Frank Chandler says: "To-day, the conception of love as a fatal force driving men, willy nilly, into sexual union, fascinating, tantalizing, torturing them, seems to obsess the minds of writers." Aspects of Modern Drama, New York: Macmillan Co., 1914, p. 278.

human beings; he was, in a sense, deified. But the modern dramatists dare to consider love and passion frankly and openly; they analyse them and often feel that they are a danger, a menace and tyranny to society rather than a glorification and exaltation.

The theme of love receives both romantic and realistic treatment in Mr. Coward's comedies of manners.[1] Although he shows a strong revulsion toward the tarnished emotions and tawdry attitudes which high society folk have toward life, he maintains a surprisingly optimistic attitude toward love. He does not hesitate to theorize and to analyse about it, but he does not strip it entirely of its romantic glamor and beauty. In fact, he seems to blend elements of romanticism and realism together with a charm, magic and individuality.

Mr. Coward's evaluation of love remains much the same in the comedies of manners; but in the plays of the first two phases, it is a minor theme. In Private Lives and Design for Living (third phase) it becomes a major theme. First let us look at some of the lines from Private Lives to estimate Mr. Coward's evaluation of modern love. Elyot says:

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1. In the musicales and the romances, Mr. Coward treats the theme of love romantically, but in Bitter Sweet, he theorizes about love. The idea that love and passion are separate and apart is indicated. (I, i, 274)

> Love is no use unless it's wise and kind
> and undramatic. Something steady and sweet,
> to smooth out your nerves when you're tired.
> Something tremendously cosy; and unflurried
> by scenes and jealousies. (I, 186)

But Elyot's love for Amanda, despite what he thought it should be, was not of this nature; it was rather a force over which he had little or no control and to which he submits optimistically. He says:

> The moment we saw one another again we knew
> it was no use going on. We knew it instantly
> really, although we tried to pretend to our-
> selves that we didn't. (II, 223-224)

And Amanda says, "The whole business is a very poor joke."

The manner in which Mr. Coward mixes realism, romanticism, and modern analysis is admirably illustrated by the following dialogue:

> Elyot: What exactly were you remembering at
> that moment?
>
> Amanda: The Palace Hotel Skating Rink in the
> morning, bright strong sunlight, and every-
> body whirling around in vivid colors, and you
> kneeling down to put on my skate for me.
>
> Elyot: You'd fallen on your fanny a few
> minutes before.
>
> Amanda: It was beastly of you to laugh like
> that, I felt so humiliated.
>
> Elyot: Poor darling.
>
> Amanda: Do you remember waking up in the morning,
> and standing on the balcony, looking out across
> the valley?

> Elyot: Blue shadows on white snow, cleanness beyond belief, high above everything in the world. How beautiful it was.
>
> Amanda: It's nice to think we had a few marvelous moments.
>
> Elyot: A few? We had heaps really, only they slip away into the background, and one only remembers the bad ones.
>
> Amanda: Yes, what fools we were to ruin it all. What utter, utter fools...
>
> Elyot: We were so ridiculously over in love.
>
> Amanda: Funny, wasn't it?
>
> Elyot: Horribly funny.
>
> Amanda: Selfishness, cruelty, hatred, possessiveness, petty jealousy. All those qualities came out in us just because we loved each other.
>
> Elyot: Perhaps they were there anyhow.
>
> Amanda: No, it's love that does it, to hell with love. (I, 209-210)

Mr. Coward expresses the belief that the intimacies of marriage stifle the quality of love. Amanda says:

> That was the trouble with Elyot and me, we were like two violent acids bubbling about in a nasty little matrimonial bottle. (I, 195)

And:

> I believe it was just the fact of our being married, and clamped together publicly, that wrecked us before.

> Elyot: That, and not knowing how to manage each other. (II, 220)

Mr. Coward deals in Private Lives with a very common mistake that divorced people make when they marry again; they will discuss the first partner with the new one; this tactless behavior is harmful to their new love, and marks a sure path to the divorce courts. Both the newly married couples cannot refrain from talking about the old partners, and analysing and comparing the quality of the new love with that of the old. We find Sibyl and Elyot saying:

> Sibyl: Do you think you could ever love her again?
>
> Elyot: Of course not, I love you.
>
> Sibyl: Yes, but you love me differently, I know that.
>
> Elyot: More wisely, perhaps.
>
> Sibyl: I'm glad. I'd rather have that sort of love. (I, 186)

Mr. Coward further philosophizes about love in Design for Living. Here again we find the idea that love is an inescapable, delightful and tantalizing force against which there is no resistance. Gilda, Otto, and Leo cannot escape, try as they may, the overwhelming inevitability of their love. They attempt to analyse it:

> Leo: It's been inevitable for years. It doesn't matter who loves who the most; you can't line things up like that mathematically. We all love each other a lot, far too much, and we've made a bloody mess of it...That was inevitable too.
>
> Gilda: We must get it straight somehow.
>
> Leo: Yes, we must get it straight and tie it up with ribbons with a bow on the top. Pity it isn't Valentine's Day!
>
> Gilda: Can't we laugh a little? Isn't it a joke? Can't we make it a joke?
>
> Leo: Yes, it's a joke. It's a joke all right. We can laugh until our sides ache. Let's start, shall we?
>
> Gilda: What's the truth of it? The absolute, deep-down truth? Until we really know that, we can't grapple with it. We can't do a thing. We can only sit here flicking words about.
>
> Leo: It should be easy, you know. The actual facts are so simple. I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves you. There now. Start to unravel from there. (I, 19)

The fact that Mr. Coward considers sex adventure a thing apart from love is indicated by the following lines:

> Leo: What happened between Gilda and me last night is actually completely unimportant - a sudden flare-up - and although we've been mutually attracted to each other for years, it wasn't even based on deep sexual love! It was just an unpremeditated roll in the hay and we enjoyed it very much, so there! (I, i, 28)

He even doubts whether this inevitable force should be termed love. Gilda says:

> Perhaps not love, exactly. Something a little below it and a little above it, but something terribly strong. (II, ii, 56)

Mr. Coward is a dramatist for young people.[1] The majority of people who attend Mr. Coward's productions are young people. He understands their problems and their viewpoints and he reflects them accurately upon the stage. To him it is a very tragic fact that young people waste golden opportunities floundering about in a morass of idleness, frivolity and cynicism. He is impatient with youth because it will not accept the inevitable logic of growing old; he shows how stupid it is for people to refuse to grow old gracefully. Too, he is concerned with the tragedy of youth in that he sees it as a mere pawn of a fatal force; young people are merely puppets of their destiny. But more often he sees the tragedy of youth to be the clash of the individual ego with the social customs and laws of man-made society.

All of Mr. Coward's plays reflect in a minor vein the tragedy of youth. In the comedies of manners of the first phase, we find the theme expressed as follows: young people as puppets of fate are presented in I'll Leave It to You; and

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1. Many of the leading exponents of the comedy of manners have been youthful playwrights. Congreve's last play was written when he was thirty, Wycherley's when he was thirty-four, Vanbrugh's when he was thirty-nine, Farquhar's when he was thirty, Sheridan's when he was twenty-eight, and Wilde's when he was thirty-nine.

the unhappy effect of divorce upon children is presented in The Young Idea. In the plays of the second phase, the tragedy of youth is presented chiefly in marriage and sex problems, and the idleness and vapidity of high society life. Judith, in Hay Fever, summarizes the theme very well when she says, "Ah, Youth, what a strange, mad muddle you make of things." The tragedy of youth which refuses to submit to the necessity of growing older is presented in The Vortex and Hay Fever. Florence Lancaster in The Vortex is a pathetic figure in her fight to hold on to her lost youth; but Judith Bliss in Hay Fever is highly amusing and delightful in the presentation of the same theme.[1] In the comedies of manners of the third phase, the tragedy of youth is shown by the clash of the individual with society. We have already noted in Private Lives and Design for Living that the characters clash with the forces of society.

We have discussed the themes of Mr. Coward's comedies of manners and several other plays of the first three phases of his dramatic career. Through the thematic content of his plays, which reflects the modern drama of social consciousness, he makes his chief contribution to the comedy of manners. For Mr. Coward does more than to present satirically the social

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1. Lady Shayne, in Bitter Sweet, does not mind being old. She says that it is only when one is very old that one can see the joke all the way round. (I, i, 272)

scene. He is not content merely to point out the absurdities and ridiculousness of mankind. At heart, he is a reformer and is seriously concerned about the state of affairs in modern aristocracy. Although Mr. Coward's best talents lie in the field of light, satiric comedy, the majority of his plays are of a serious nature. He is seldom able to present a detached viewpoint; the majority of his plays reveal considerable impatience with the waste and futility, the hypocrisy, and the prudishness of moral conventions.

CONCLUSION

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The purpose of this study has been to ascertain Noel Coward's contribution to the comedy of manners. Briefly, the results of the investigation are:

FIRST, Noel Coward has kept alive the tradition of the comedy of manners in modern drama and has brought it up to date. He has injected new life into a very threadbare form of drama and has made it more flexible without losing any of its original tone or quality. He has adapted it to the needs and conditions of the modern theatre. He has proved that the Comic Spirit can live in an age of social consciousness and serious critical attitudes toward life.

SECOND, he has drawn excellent, satirical group portraits of the modern, post-war aristocratic society. Perhaps his chief value to the dramatic historian will lie in his unique ability to portray more accurately than any other playwright the artificiality of the sophisticated Twenties. In his comedies of manners, we live again the post-war era; the passé bohemian atmosphere, with its noise and jazz, is depicted with uncanny skill. Too, he has, more than any other English playwright, represented on the stage the English country house, which plays such a large part in the life of the well-born.

THIRD, he has contributed dialogue which, in the matter of brilliance and wit, has seldom been equalled and never surpassed in the Twentieth Century drama. It is exuberant, easy and graceful; it is often colloquial, slangy, barbed, flippant and of the moment. It is in keeping with the character of the people about whom he writes.

FOURTH, he has written plays which, though mechanistic in design, are artistic. His use of the "well-made" play formula is facile and adroit. His many years of experience as actor, author and director equip him with an understanding of the resources of the stage, which he cleverly employs in his carefully planned structural pattern.

FIFTH, he has flavored the thematic content of his comedies of manners with a moralistic quality. In his satirical presentation of the social scene, he wishes not only to expose the ridiculousness of mankind, but also to criticize the weaknesses and foibles of aristocratic society. He is seriously concerned about the conditions of his post-war world, and underneath the bright sayings of his characters there lurks a melancholy cynicism and intimation of wisdom. He is impatient with the waste and futility of high society life; at the same time, he castigates the prudishness of the moral code. But this moralistic quality is never obvious; it is subtle and intangible. Mr. Coward never offers or suggests

any solutions for the problems presented; his moralistic approach is, therefore, negative.

Finally, Mr. Coward has displayed the comedy of manners in its newest and most up to the minute attire. His formula, which has the semblance of originality, expresses itself through the medium of an inimitable style. With a rapidity of movement, a flair for brilliant dialogue, an acute sense of situation and scene, and a keen satiric mind, he has, in his better plays, set a standard for the comedy of manners in modern drama comparable with that of Congreve. But Mr. Coward has essayed forms of drama other than the comedy of manners. He is versatile and prolific; but only in a few of his plays does he attain that quality of excellence toward which he has aspired.

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